

The Aesthetics of Healing in the Sacredness of the African American Female's Bible: Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) stands in the tradition of African American use of the biblical musings that aims to relativize and yet uphold a new version of the sacred story under the gaze of a black woman that manipulates and admonishes the characters of the gospel to offer a feminist side of the Bible. The novel discloses Hurston's mastering of the aesthetics that black folklore infused to the African American cultural experience and her accommodation to bring to the fore the needed voice of black women. Rejecting the role of religion as a reductive mode of social protest, the novel extends its jeremiadic ethos and evolves into a black feminist manifesto in which a world without women equates disruption and instability. Hurston showcases the importance of an inclusive and ethic sacred femininity to reclaim a new type of womanhood both socially and aesthetically. Three decades before the post-colonial era, Hurston's bold representation of the sacred femininity recasts the jeremiad tradition to pin down notions of humanitarianism, social justice and the recognition of politics of art. All in all, in an era of a manly social protest literature Hurston opts for portraying the folkloric aesthetics of spirituality as creative agency simply to acknowledge the leadership of the sacred femininity that black women could remodel into art.

Keywords: Sacred femininity, Zora Neale Hurston, African American jeremiad, Aesthetics, Healing

Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down. I do not choose to admit weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility.

Zora Neale Hurston, "Religion," from *Dust Tracks on a Road*

1. Introduction

Although in her classic essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Zora Neale Hurston sarcastically claimed that "(t)he Negro is not a Christian really" (1997: 56), her third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), stands in the tradition of a long history of African American use of the biblical musings that aims to relativize and yet uphold a new version of the sacred story under the gaze of a black woman that manipulates and admonishes the characters of the gospel to offer a feminist side of the Bible. The novel is densely interwoven and richly textured with literary and cultural allusions. It has been analyzed as a meditation on the nature of the authoritarian state and of absolute political power especially when these ideas apply to the reality of black people in the US. Published in 1939 it is no wonder that, as Deborah E. McDowell highlights, "Hurston's *Moses* can be read as an intervention in the discourses about race ranging throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but also discourses used to justify...the utter extinction of Jews under Nazi Germany" (1991: 17) since 1939 was the year Hitler ordered the attack on Poland which led Germany into a World War. But if, as Judylyn S. Ryan explains (2005: 29), "cultural identity and spiritual identity are coterminous", Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* can also be read as an exercise that foregrounds the status and future direction of African American liberation discourses, in which black women priestesses play a central role. In this vein, and following black historian Albert Raboteau, Afro-Christianity "could become a double-edged sword" (1978: 290) for it can be used to foster black liberation theology and to engender a black feminist aesthetics akin to a sacred femininity embodied by a black priestess.

Moses, Man of the Mountain is divided into two complementary parts: the first one takes place in Egypt and follows the whereabouts of Moses, his coming-of-age and his transformation into the leader of his real people, the Hebrews, to whom he will lead into their liberating adventure. The second part bears testimony of Moses's power vis-à-vis the prophetess Miriam's and the subsequent moment of declension after his conversion into a totalitarian religious leader that turns a blind eye to the spiritual necessities of his townspeople. The doleful rhetoric precludes the final declension of the flawed society is done at the expense of Miriam's sacred femininity and her ultimate destruction due to a much spread corruption that shuns the inclusive ethos that the new society winds up lacking. By the end of the story both parts complement each other since the bigotry and exclusion that triggers the Hebrews on the move is absorbed by the free people and gets out of hand of Moses's but also Miriam's leadership. I submit that the result is the literary verification of the necessity to rethink the nation through the paramount participation of black womanhood. At the same time, the novel discloses Hurston's mastering of the aesthetics that black folklore infuse to the African American

cultural experience and her accommodation to bring to the fore the needed voice of black women.

2. *Moses, Man of the Mountain*: Healing, Affective Sacredness and Inclusion towards a Black Female Epistemology

The novel opens with a quote from Deuteronomy that brings the focus to the “signs and wonders” that Moses is to find in the land of the Pharaoh. Indeed, signs of the bigotry with which the United States has tried to corner black people are present throughout the story but so are the wonders that make this black people unite in fraternity to overcome them. The aesthetics of the sacred story as reshaped within the cultural paradigms of African America is told in a figurative lyrical narrative voice loosely based on the regional black vernacular that black authors appropriated during the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, although Hurston draws on the historical events as told in the Old Testament that revolve around the figure of Moses as the liberator of the Jewish people from the bondage endured under the Egyptian regime, the characters of the novel are created following the cultural models that the African American folklore offered. Thus, Hurston’s interpolating exercise and interpellation of the biblical episode drives the reader into a layered narrative that folklorizes the typological ethnogenesis as a trope in African American literature whilst it promotes the so needed affect as healing within African American women.

Through the aesthetics of the biblical typology, Hurston sharpens her narrative to a status of biblical black drama, that is, it reshapes the biblical message to create a black feminine aesthetics akin to the folkloric status that the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance summoned. In her article “Seeing the World as it is” –included in her autobiographical notes *Dust Track on a Road*– Hurston, then, makes use of the biblical story to weave an interconnected web in which, through the analogy relating the biblical Israel with the United States, she intermixes a stark critique of the imperialist and expansionist politics of her own country:

The Old Testament is devoted to what was right and just from the point of view of the Ancient Hebrews. All of their enemies were twenty-two carat evil. They, the Hebrews, were never aggressors. The Lord wanted his children to have a country full big of grapes and tall corn. Incidentally, while they were getting it, they might as well get rid of some trashy tribes that He did not think much of, anyway... If the conquest looked like a bloody rape to the Canaanites, that was because their evil ways would not let them see appoint that was right upon their nose... We, too, consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathen who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own... there is a geographical boundary to our principles. They are not to leave the United States unless we take them ourselves. (Hurston, 2003: 254, 255-260).

The hedging with Hurston’s contemporary reality follows the cultural legacy based on a feminist aesthetic appraisal of creating a cultural message that can live up to the

democratic ideals of inclusion and respectability. To do so, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is firmly grounded in the alleged tradition of African American culture and, as such, reinterprets the Bible to make its story fit into the real experience that black people endured in North America. Besides, Hurston's feminist appropriation of the Exodus motif enlarges the African American cultural basin by positioning sacredness and spirituality as the best support so that a black feminist aesthetics be properly conveyed. In this way, the African American woman can openly prove her sense of mastering the black vernacular culture and simultaneously proffer a message of brightness by showcasing the ability of creating a new type of artistic tenet out of a commonly used trope within African American culture. Hurston equates the evolving bonds of sacredness with creation and feels like the transceiver of a cultural chain which poses spirituality within the politics of the affect to unite the polyvocal experience of African American women. In so doing, she gives a new reading to the identity-building process of black women since her focus on the sacred knowledge of the self reveals a new face of spirituality that is displayed into an artistic form that constitutes a new turn in the religious aesthetics that black women created. Transcending the role of Christian religion and its creed as mere tools for sociopolitical resistance, what Hurston does, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words, is to reel off "sacred knowledge directly to sacred Scripture" and articulates the idea "that it is the function of spiritual beings to discover this inner meaning of revealed truth and to use their intelligence in the contemplation of spiritual realities" (1989: 18).

As Judylyn S. Ryan (2005: 66) rightly notes, "Hurston does not emphasize the typological significance of the Exodus story" but, though she sees Hurston's literary output as a reconceptualization of "a liberation narrative centered on Moses" who, on top of that, "is theorized as culturally Black", I consider Hurston's novel as a literary exercise of further pressure to the feminist process of identity-building for black women. Assuredly, the novel manipulates the Exodus theme blended with the African American culture not only to offer a new interoperation of history that can live up to the standards of the black community but also, I contend, as a unique way to show how sacredness and affective bonds can create and/or fray the epistemology of African American women.

Accordingly, in my reading of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston's main preoccupation is the necessity to create a feminist subjectivity for black women. A creation that will result, and thereby develop, a feminist aesthetic that accounts sacredness as a tentative agent that shapes up the role of African American women along the twentieth century by propelling the idea of gender healing within the black community. Thus, black women's sacred reading of Christianity not only "proposes a new identity" (Ryan, 2005: 31) for African American women but surpasses the paradigm of resistance, that is "the framework within which Western interpretations of African diaspora artistic and expressive culture have been traditionally located" (11). Zora Neale Hurston's linking of spirituality and epistemology brings forth a feminist cosmology in which black women, even if they simply, or apparently, frame the text—as it is the case of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*—play a central role in the stylistic, cultural

and thematic elements of the novel. In other words, in Hurston's artistic procedure "spirituality serves epistemological functions and assists ideological objectives...that begin with healing" (23).

Interestingly, Hurston's conception of epistemology as applied to black women impels spirituality to exceed its theoretical conception and to commute into a principle of art that models, and adds up, the concept of knowing so deeply attached to epistemology. If, as Timothy Nicholas Laurie (2012: 1) expounds, "in structuralist frameworks influenced by Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and others the episteme (without its -ology) can be a powerful critical concept for historicizing and politicizing the institutional basis of 'methods of knowing'", Hurston proposes the aesthetics of sacredness and spirituality as another way to dispatch knowing (episteme). In the context of what Walter D. Mignolo calls 'coloniality/modernity', the dissociation between "epistemology and the episteme leads to some difficulties in accounting for the work of gathering sources and organising knowledge claims that are required to critique other's way of knowing" (Laurie, 2012: 2). Advancing such theories, Hurston boldly states an alternative way of acquiring (self-)knowledge through the centrality of spirituality but, also, presents a feminist way for the epistemic reconfiguration of the black female self. She does so by combining spirituality and feminine affective bonds for, as Lévi-Strauss acutely declares, human emotions can help us "undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible" (1977: 198).

Due to this, from the outset of the narration Hurston clears things up and informs the reader about the "role that ultranationalism plays as a religious faith" (Thompson, 2004: 395). And so, she states how women are the ones to suffer the most when it comes down to enduring bigotry and authority:

The Hebrew womb had fallen under the heel of Pharaoh. A ruler great in his newness and new in his greatness had arisen in Egypt and he had said, 'This is law. Hebrew boys shall not be born. All offenders against this law shall suffer death by drowning'. So women in the pains of labor hid in caves and rocks (Hurston, 1991: 1).

Women emerge as the victims par excellence since they –considered as wombs in a perfect analogy of the Pharaoh as slave master– and their offspring are the ones to challenge, by standing the chance to subvert the social order, the religious-based society. Hurston intersperses the rewriting of the Bible's story with the most poignant moments that African American women suffered: the conflicting relationship between black female slaves and their children as the product of rape. The black woman, as a womb carrying the legacy of new generation of African Americans, equates problems and social tension. In this way, although this is not solely its aim, the story works inevitably like a mirror to North American history.

Extending the heritage of slavery into the conception of black aesthetics, Hurston's *speakerly* narrative voice, which evolves from standard English to a free indirect speech amalgamating both standard and vernacular characteristics to eventually blend the characters' black speech, warns the reader about the distinguishable facts that separate the sacred conception of whites and blacks: "He says their gods ain't our gods" (5). The

stylized and rhetorically sophisticated black vernacular voice not only acknowledges the authority of black subjectivity from the start but also establishes the sacred domain in which the story is going to revolve around. Besides, by pointing to the multiple interpretation of multiple gods opposite to the concept of an almighty God, Hurston extrapolates the idea of sacredness with regards to inner spirituality –akin to the African folklore– instead of clinging to the notion of a solely creator of humankind.

Hurston aesthetics of the biblical episode reflects the flaws of the North American nation and exposes the crevices of the injured democracy. Not only does the author drag into the light the mischiefs of the Reconstruction regarding black rights: “Some of them even thought that they might get back their houses and lands” (15) but she also turns her gaze to upbraid the multiethnic reality that casted the formation of the nation. If Egypt equates United States, Hurston implores the recognition of the spiritual beliefs of Native Americans and their forgotten extermination: “What god you talking about, Jochebed? These gods was here in Egypt long before we ever thought of coming here. Don’t look to them for too much, honey. Then you won’t be disappointed” (17). It is in this way when the author aims to reshape the falsely acclaimed version that attests to describe the birth of the nation and mediates in the reconfiguration of the African American cultural discourse. Furthermore, with such a move Hurston takes on a new level within the jeremiadic rhetoric and inscribes her narrative in the second stance of the allegorical tradition of the jeremiad: “criticism of present declension or retrogression from the promise” (Howard-Pitney, 2003: 8). Hurston posits the stark critique that reads the United States in terms of racial purity also within the African American community.

Hurston’s attention to the folklorist black vernacular directs her discourse out of the border of what the country boasts about. Religion now is not solely an empowering tool but rather it helps to signal the pitfalls of a society unable to cater for each other. By creating an Africanist rereading of the Exodus motif, Hurston pledges her own characters to commit the same mistakes that their biblical counterparts did. The Pharaoh manifests the repulsion he feels towards the Hebrews because of her racial category, something that turns them into fake citizens:

Here they were. Hebrews, who had come down into Egypt as the allies and aides of those oppressors of the Egyptian people, and as such had trampled on the proud breast of Egyptian liberty for more than hundred years. But the gods had used the magnificent courage of the real Egyptians to finally conquer and expel those sheep-herding interlopers whom the Hebrews had aided in every way they could to deprive the real Egyptians of their homes and their liberties. (19, emphasis added)

Egypt metamorphoses into a slave plantation that mistreats Hebrews and corners their self-assertion. It is Jochebed who openly defies the social hierarchy that tries to erase Hebrew –or black– epistemologies and she does so by rethinking the sacred order that theology prescribes: “If the gods want the life of my innocent boy, then they got to make a move and show me” (23). This maternal resistance is the first example in which sacredness and affect become intertwined in the hands of a (black) woman not only to challenge the national conventions but also to set the movement in motion for other

black women to follow. The legacy of miscegenation –that is the real image of United States– falls back in Princess, the Pharaoh’s daughter, who finds Jochebed’s babyboy inside a straw basket and adopts him as a his own child. When Miriam, Jochebed’s daughter, who has witnessed such a feat, informs her mother of the whereabouts of her little brother, Jochebed is asked to be the boy’s nurse with little surprise. After all, the palace is no exempt to miscegenation as one of the eldest Hebrew women confesses to Jochebed: “(t)here is plenty of Hebrew blood in that family already. That is why that Pharaoh wants to kill us all off. He is scared somebody will come along and tell who his real folks are” (33). The Biblical story is aptly used by Hurston to willingly express the mixed-race origins of her nation. Also, aestheticizing the biblical story to make it fit into the African American tempestuous historical past, the author is overtly criticizing the one drop rule and showcasing the injustice that represents the racial categorization in the process of identity-building. However, just as the United States is absolutely inconceivable without the manifold contributions of African Americans, the old woman hastens to admit that “(t)his country can’t make out without us” (34).

Indeed, the intricate relationships that belie the unity under the Pharaoh’s regime act as the perfect analogy of the slave system. Hurston’s aesthetics also reveal her acute sense of cooking up the social conflicts of the world into an interconnected amalgam of power relations. As such, the Pharaoh seems to embody the flesh and bones of a cruel master of the plantation but also, and taking into account that the novel was published when the Third Reich had already ascended to power, the reminiscences of the Pharaoh’s obstinacy with social purity bring the figure of Adolf Hitler to mind. Hurston makes this analogy crystal clear: “The Pharaoh had his programs, national and international. At home he worked to reorganize the county into a unit intensely loyal to the new regime. Externally he strove to bulwark the country against outside attack” (36). The author blends the exclusionist and utterly racist theories of Hitler with the exclusionist creed that Puritans also manifested in their intellectual construction of a nation –as noted in John Winthrop's words to envision a hierarchical community: "If we here be a corporation established by free consent, if the place of our co-habitation be our owne, then no man hath right to come into us ... without our consent" (qtd. in Vaughan, 1972: 199). That the Pharaoh, with its religious symbolism, can get associated with the sacred zeal of Puritans and Hitler’s hatred of Jewish beliefs attests to prove that *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is Hurston’s artistic way to portray the aforementioned “retrogression from the promise”.

The opposite male role in the novel is Moses, son of the Princess and second in line for the throne of Egypt. The creation of a subjectivity that can counteract that of the Pharaoh is modelled following the cultural outlets that the African American tradition offered. Contrarily to what the Pharaoh haughtily professes, the old prophet Mantu, who appears here as the griot in the black oral folklore, teaches Moses that “all love is tempered with something” (43). Mantu’s preservation and re-mythologizing of the legend of origins - “In the beginning ... there was neither nothing nor anything. Darkness hid in darkness – shrouded in nothingness” (43, emphasis added) - contemplate the idea of creating a new version of History and seems to foretell that the

novel poses a threat to the canonical version of the Exodus episode. So, although the Pharaoh insists on ensuring Moses's "military genius" (50), the old prophets stand out the Prince's allurements towards "temple magic" (44). Just as slaveholders completely overlooked the power that spirituals held for African American slaves, Moses regains here not a physical but a spiritual power that will eventually make him a cultural leader within the Hebrew crew. Again, the folklore that Africans brought along with them to the so-called New World is the mold in which Hurston reshapes the subjectivity of African Americans in the story. The paradigm Jews/Egyptians fits perfectly as an aestheticized binary opposition American/African American in religious terms. Religion is not –solely– an asset of empowerment but the cultural line that draws differences in identity-building and cultural representation in the US.

The power for self-assertion, Hurston implies, can be found in the African American cultural emblems and imagery that conforms their own folkloric net, such as the trope of the Talking Book. As Moses is told when paging a traditional volume: "When you read only two pages in this book you will enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountain, and the sea. You will know what the birds of the air and the creeping things are saying. You will know the secrets of the deep because the power is there to bring them to you" (53). The Talking Book constituted a foundational trope for the African American literary tradition in which, to denounce the illiteracy that slaves were shamefully submitted to, when Africans were presented with a book the outcome revealed the lack of reading skills of blacks and so: "the text does not recognize his presence and so refuses to share its secrets or decipher its coded message" (1988: 127), as Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains.

The supernatural power of the *speakerly*¹ nature of the Talking Book manifests itself through the Book of Thoth², a book that, Jethro confesses to Moses, "if you read it, will bring you to the gods. When you read only two pages in this book you will enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountain, and the sea... You will know the secrets of the deep because the power is there to bring them to you" (53). In depicting a book that not only talks but also reveals the sacred mysteries of the world Hurston embellishes the cultural tenet with sacredness and magical folklore, that is, it highlights its vernacular characteristics whilst it foresees Moses's destiny. By aestheticizing the Talking Book with sacredness, she also subverts and reinvents the trope, allowing black Americans "to define their own reality instead of allowing others to define it for them" (Andrews, 2001: 285), and focuses its power on the spiritual conception it reflects to Moses. In this way, and inspired in the conception of wisdom as it is depicted in the Bible's First Epistle to the Corinthians, Mentu warns Moses that "(l)earning without wisdom is a load of books on a donkey's back" (54). Hurston's signifies upon the revision of the trope of the Talking Book by making it a shared experience of discovery whereas in the original trope the slave alone had to find out about its transcendence. The African American folkloric motif is thus aestheticized following the ethics of care that the affective turn of Hurston's spirituality ponders. Therefore, Mentu's passing on spiritual musings of wisdom encapsulate Spinoza's affectio because, according to Megan Walkins (2004: 269), "(a)ffectio may be fleeting

but it may also leave a residue, a lasting impression that produces particular kinds of bodily capacities". Through Spinoza's theory, spirituality, reason and affect intermingle into a politics of healing and, duly, the old griot's affectio will allow Moses to a "capacity of affect to be retained, to accumulate, to form dispositions and thus shape subjectivities" (Walkins, 2004: 269). Certainly, as Egypt –that is United States– enlarges its empire as the North American nation did along the nineteenth and twentieth century: "The might of Egypt was stretching across the world. Ethiopia was conquered; Assyria kept in fear, Babylonia was terrorized. All tribes flowed towards Rameses and Memphis" (57), Moses reshapes his identity, or episteme following structuralists, according to the folkloric roots of the African American cultural experience. This conflicting identity-building follows inevitably W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness theory and, therefore, roots Moses's subjectivity within the black cultural matrix: "Long ago before he was twenty, he had found out that he was two beings. In short, he was everybody boiled down to a drop. Everybody is two beings: one lives and flourishes in the day-light and stands guard. The other being walks and howls at night" (60). Torn apart at the discovery that he really is a Hebrew, his doleful rhetoric á la Sojourner Truth –"Am I a Hebrew?" (68)– triggers Moses's real command to her own townspeople and leads his regained crew towards the desert. It is then when Moses definitely crosses the color line and wraps up his double consciousness into one or, in other words, as a proper African American: "Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over" (78). The lyrical passage responds to the aestheticized signification of Moses into a black character. In Judylyn S. Ryan's apt words (2005: 68), "(t)his passage both manifests and encapsulates Hurston's narrative project: to overturn the concept, leaving it empty –but full of potential– ready for a new investment that is facilitated by Moses's "new" cultural, theological, and political investiture".

Moses, now part of the Hebrews, will develop his leadership obsessed with the book containing the serpent that Mentu told him about and decided to master the language, black vernacular, of his people: I want to talk the dialect of your people. Its no use of talking unless people understand what you say" (92). Moses's adoption of the expressiveness of folk diction symbolizes how to Hurston, as to Frantz Fanon, "(t)o speak a language is to take a world, a culture" (Fanon, 1967: 38). He thereby fully embraces African American folkloric culture and so Hurston's vernacular aesthetics embark upon the unfolding of a narrative of healing and cultural pride. The reformulation of black culture following the aesthetics of the folkloric tradition is upheld by Hurston after her research period in Haiti. In her now canonical book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, which appeared in 1938, a year before the publication of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston already establishes the sacred connections of Moses and his folkloric aesthetics of the black Caribbean: "All over Haiti it is well established that Damballah is identified as Moses, whose symbol was the serpent. This worship of Moses recalls the hard-to-explain fact that whatever the Negro is found, there are traditional tales of Moses and his supernatural powers that are not in the Bible" (1990b: 16).

In Hurston's hands then Moses enlarges his biblical characterization and his ethos is molded harmonizing the folkloric aspects of the black vernacular tradition. In this way Moses, just as Mark Christian Thompson (2004: 397) argues, not only "signifies a hybrid iconographic genealogy that manifests itself as the locus of a new pantheon apart from Voodoo or Christian churches" but his ascendancy as leader within the black community shatters the concept of racial purity that the Pharaoh longed to preserve. This newly-conceived cultural move was rather striking considering the protean purity that Marcus Mosiah Garvey's ideology – the Garveyite movement- spread throughout the black community in the first decades of the twentieth century with his black nationalist political programs. Thompson also sees clear how "in Hurston's Moses there is no understanding of the new nation in terms of a biological conception of race, and therefore there is no positive evaluation of the Garveyite movement" (2004: 398). It is rather the contrary, as Thompson (2004: 398) himself further contends: "Hurston's Moses offers a radicalization of commonplace readings of the Harlem Renaissance's cultural aesthetic of an authentic African American being that permits racial détente". Moses's magical powers are but a prominent trait that put African folklore within the aesthetic discourse of African America. The power that the Hebrews grant him is not based on political force. Rather, Moses becomes "to them power in itself" (116) due to his developed folkloric skills. Featuring himself "like the voice of God" (116), that is a black God, the Hebrew people "came to believe that the hand of Moses held all of the powers of the supernatural in its grasp" and unable to decipher such folkloric roots, he "became divine" (116). The Hebrews' mesmerizing response to Moses's supernatural powers acts as a mirror to the real exposition of the true hues of Africa's weight on the African American. In this sense, *Moses, Man of the Mountain's* blending of folklore and tendency towards affective bonds foreruns Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* since in both novels, as María Ruth Noriega Sánchez (2002: 64) considers about the latter, "the magic is attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dermas/visions". Thus, this "folk heritage" (1995: 18), as Erik D. Curren puts it, situates Moses as the mediator of a tradition that merges pagan superstition with religious fervor, probably Hurston's major contribution to the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance cultural movement. The sacred and divine conception of the lead male character is, henceforth, "the gateway between the spiritual and material worlds" (King 2008: 61).

However, and though it seems that "(t)he rule of law ... is not passed from one ruler to the next by blood lineage, but by the cultural inheritance of sovereign masculinity" (Thompson 2004: 397), Hurston's leaning on affect brings Moses's subjectivity thoroughly attached to that of his lover Zipporah and Miriam. Although Miriam is not presented as the main character of the story, her presence illuminates Hurston's theological recasting of the biblical plot. Moses and Miriam's epistemology become intertwined from the exact moment in which both reunite when Moses comes back to Egypt as his redemptory mission God commanded to him. When he is asked to liberate the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage, Moses finds Miriam's role as a priestess within her crew as a driving force. Her presence looms over her fellow citizens showcasing a

sacred feminist function that, triggering black women's affective turn, standing out as a referent and social leader aims to bring together the whole community as Aaron makes clear to Moses: "My sister Miriam is a great prophetess, Moses. Talking about influence, she's got plenty. We couldn't make out without her, that's all. Everybody comes to her to get things straightened out. She's a two-headed woman with power" (135). Miriam's revered power that allows her to be able to "handle anybody" (135) and her home assumes to be the central site of a matrix of healing for the Hebrew community: "her house is full every night of the people who come to her house to get help" (135). Moses's leadership and embracement of folklore has to be inevitably shared with a feminist figure that resorts to spirituality to be acclaimed as a leader and also as a means to unfurl the poetics of healing: "Miriam is called to prophesy to Israel and I am called to save Israel, our paths don't conflict at all" (136).

Judylyn S. Ryan (2005: 68) justly points out that "Moses's strategy centers on developing a religious ideology that would enable the Hebrews to rediscover and reclaim their own expropriated creative agency". However, this creative agency might as well be upheld, I contend, thanks, to a great extent, to Miriam's leadership within her community that positions her subjectivity at the crossroads of a sacred feminine authority that draws its aesthetics as much from the black Christian creed as from the folkloric strands of African –magical and supernatural– beliefs. Resultantly, by re-mythologizing and expanding the novel's cultural milieu, Miriam displays a narrative gesture that links the US and Africa and brings to the front black women's spiritual and intellectual leadership across the Black Atlantic overshadowing, in such a move, the burdensome effects of slavery and Reconstruction along centuries.

Hurston points to the reductive theological power of Moses as the main protagonist and offers Miriam as his spiritual contraposition. When Moses publicly claims Miriam's leadership in his eulogy: "all about those days back in Egypt when the house of the prophetess Miriam was the meeting place of all those who were willing to work for freedom. How she had gathered folks together by two and threes and changed weakness into resolution" (265, emphasis added) he accepts her status as a leader in Israel and thus certifies her inclusive spirituality as a force of empowerment. Miriam embodies Hurston's preeminence towards the Sanctified Church for black women in which they not only took central stage but also, as W.E.B. Du Bois (1994: 118) accepts, stood as "real conservers of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is God and Right".

However, once the Hebrews have been set free and get relocated into an autonomous setting –a literary analogy of the so called Great Migration– the particular cosmology that Goshen epitomized for the unfolding of their black folkloric culture is definitively left behind. The blurring of an exact geography comes to represent the blemishes of a sacred aesthetics if this is not based on inclusion and African (ancestral) folklore. Or else, the African part is lesser nourished to the American one. It is Miriam, "the leader of Israel's womanhood" (218), the one who openly challenges Moses's prostituted commanding to the exclusionary arms of the American exceptionalism. Hurston's spiritual rendition of the fallacy of the African American jeremiad not only

points out to the way black American leaders have systematically imitated the Puritans rhetoric of abusive leadership but also highlights how women leaders have historically been shunned from participating in the reclamation of a genuine African American place in sacred history. Moses's iconic model of spiritual leadership daringly turns him into a black John Winthrop and therefore impends his fellow citizens with a highly Puritan rhetoric that brings to mind the historical covenant between the founding fathers and God: "You ain't talking to me, you know. It wasn't my idea to bring you out of Egypt. Your God commanded me to bring you. Go talk to Him. But I'm telling you now your attitude is a temptation to God to punish you, and punish you to death" (207).

Hurston proposes a feminist discourse to counterpart the tainted message that African American absorbed against their own aesthetic powers. It is also her way to boost sacred femininity as the means to both reclaim and collect black women's contribution to the (African) American cultural arena. Hence, Miriam's sanctioning rhetoric entails to retain her place in society as a sacred feminist leader focusing on the communal benefit of her entire townspeople: "I don't aim to be robbed out of my labor like that" (219). Just as Moses adopts his role as the Chosen Man of God, his leadership role gets out of hand and blows out the egalitarian position he initially claimed to hold. The eventual equation of his figure with God himself is Hurston's literary strategy to signal African Americans' digression from the path of transracial multivocality within the same community – the aforementioned "criticism of present declension or retrogression from the promise" (Howard-Pitney, 2003: 8). Moses unveils himself as a neo-Puritan pretending to overreach his power not with but against his people by emblazing Jethro's words in his mindset: "God to the folks, Moses. That's what you was born to be" (223). Hurston implies that Moses's subjectivity vis-à-vis God forecasts the declension that the jeremiad tradition underscores since it puts a leadership akin to the mission of exceptionalist endeavor before the social and cultural necessities of people, as Jethro keeps on reminding him: "...but the mission Moses, the mission" (224). In other words, Moses winds up accepting the North American exceptionalism that praises individualism against the bonds of the communal black folklore. It is in that precise moment when Miriam gives up her backing on Moses and veers the perception of his subjectivity grounding it out of the margins of the black vernacular tradition and, consequently, out of the sacred vision that accompanies her affective realization of the African American cultural experience. In an openly feminist speech, Miriam lavishes and exhausts her retaliatory anger on Moses rolling up spirituality and affect:

Yes, that no-count Egyptian come with his mealy mouth and talked me and Aaron into bringing you all off. We was the ones that done all the work because he ain't one of us sure enough. He couldn't have got nobody to follow him. Here I was a big prophetess in Israel and Aaron was a leader, so the people followed us on and off now he done took full credit for everything...Why, it's awful. I never seen such a caper cut in all my born days (230, emphasis added).

Miriam's rhetoric exhortation interpolates her own townfolks by stirring their inner emotions while building upon Tomlinson's theorization which proclaims how

“(c)ultural ways of responding to gender that portray women as emotional and concerned with the personal sphere interpretations of feminist discourse” outline the power relations through a “rhetorical model” (2010: 45). Furthermore, Hurston’s use of Miriam’s punning black vernacular speech objectivizes the cultural gap between Moses and the prophetess. The transcultural move of relying into a single and almighty God breaks through as a dire contradiction to the African-based cultural conjuring of several Gods. Put shortly, Hurston deplors the debunking of folkloric beliefs within the Puritan copied ethos of African Americans: “(b)ut we do know something about our gods back in Egypt...Maybe that’s how come we having such a hard time, because we done give up our gods” (230). Against the exclusionary, puritan-like and individualist ethos that Moses finally adopts, Miriam wraps her sacred wings around her community and acting as a spiritual guide and mentor longing people to cling to each other as a means to collectively overcome their underestimated status and recollect the scattered pieces that shimmer under the delusion of the jeremiad rhetoric device. A collective move that needs, necessarily, to be contemplated within the folkloric aesthetics of her feminist vision to simply “consulate us out here in this wilderness where we been dragged for nothing” (231).

Hurston’s rendition of the post-demise momentum of the African American jeremiad is all the more championed when, forestalling the shortcomings of the structuralist development of the episteme, she posits the fallen nature of the exclusionist ethos also within the Hebrew –black– community. The declension comes fully unfolded when, out of nationalist bigotry - which is presented as the North American national sin- even Miriam, the leader priestess that aimed to compose herself as the counterpart of the assimilationist subjectivity of Moses, woefully evolves into a racist commander unable to accept Moses’s wife, Zipporah, because of the color of her skin. In a scene of boasting faux she outcries: “Look how dark her skin is. We don’t want people like that among us mixing up our blood and all” (243). To put this point another way, Miriam culminates her life participating in a “history of national weakness and decadence” (Thompson, 2004: 402).

When two competing ideologies cohabit in an overlapped system of power relations in which the distinction between the ruler and the masses is inevitably imbalanced, Deleuze & Guattari observe that

(t)he masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they ‘want’ to be repressed, in a kind of masochistic hysteria; nor are they tricked by ideological lure...It’s too easy to be antifacist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective (qtd. in Laurie, 2012: 5).

With such a move, Hurston departs then from Lévi-Strauss and warns, in tune with Deleuze & Guattari, that if not handled through a transnational, transracial and inclusive perspective, “affective bonds between people make revolutionary groups capable of becoming micro-fascistic, or transform a sound principle into a damaging social practice” (Laurie, 2012: 5). Furthermore, Miriam’s strategy of imposed skin color

hierarchy foreruns, and validates, Homi Bhabha's mimicry in which the discriminated against winds up imitating the exclusionary ethos by adopting the ideas of the oppressor. So, if Moses thoroughly tried to cajole Hebrews into the appropriation of the Puritan ideological legacy, Miriam equally attests to draw difference to foster exclusion due to skin color. Hurston seems to put the critique forward to the lack of diversity within the same black community. At a moment in which black nationalism was gaining social impulse, Zora Neale Hurston's trenchant exercise of folkloric aesthetics surpasses the social protest literature mastered by her black male fellow writers and feminizes the national discourse consecrating Bhabha's perception of a nation understood as a "heterogeneous, changeable, grouping, ambivalent in its constitution, split by otherness within, and hybridized at its every contact with the Other" (Childs, 1997: 140).

When Miriam relinquishes her inclusive sacred role and opts to follow the discriminatory nature of the exceptionalist North American creed, Hurston's 'politics of recognition', paraphrasing Charles Taylor, sanctions the corruption of sacred femininity through a divine and magical punishment that turns the priestess into the Other, epitomizing Emmanuel Levinas' ethical core of Otherness and essence. As the French philosopher ponders (1998: 10), "(t)he responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity" and the aggressive exclusion that Miriam stands up for does away with the sacred femininity that had defined her social role and subjectivity. As a consequence, the punishment arrives in the transformation, and predestined destruction, of her own essence because eventually, as Levinas (1998: 13) acquaints, (i)n its being subjectivity undoes essence by substituting itself for another". Miriam's inclusionary being is therefore commuted into the essence of exclusion and the sacred sanction transmogrifies her self.

Through this ontological move that addresses the splintering and/or gelling of the structuralist era with a healthy dollop of existentialism and a larding of black aesthetics, Hurston contemplates a sacred femininity shaped by a core ethical movement towards inclusion and democracy—with "imbrications of emotions and ethical concerns" (2010: 45) to put it in Tomlinson's words— so, in the end, Miriam's divine punishment falls upon her in the form of a leprosy which magically, yet dreadfully, whitens her skin and turns her into "a horrible sight in her leprous whiteness" (246) that relegates her as an outcast within her own black community. Hurston confirms this way her compromise with sacred femininity as "confrontation with abjection" (Kristeva, 2001: 37) forward marching the Levinasian line that offers "(t)he exposedness to affection and vulnerability" as the best way to conjure up a black female subject ethically located "between cognition of the individual and of the universal" (Levinas, 1998: 62).

Additionally, Hurston's sacredness can be regarded as perfect example of what Ronald Neal (2011: 732) coins as spirit of pragmatism in his article "Democracy, Difference, and Reconstruction: Religion, Theology, and the Spirit of Pragmatism". In it Deal explains that pragmatism "emerged as a philosophical tradition whose sole purpose was to offset tyrannical forces in American life". Just in line with Charles Sanders, William James or John Dewey who appear as classic pragmatists, Hurston

main's critique through the tyrannical evolution of both Moses and Miriam gets entrenched with a pragmatic reading of spirituality as a healing and encompassing force since religious pragmatism, Neal contends, proceeds to render "a vision of America marked by the virtue of plurality or difference" (2011: 732).

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, the sacred declension of female sacredness as portrayed by Miriam underscores the necessity to develop a new kind of female subjectivity related to the sacred femininity that the Sanctified Church offered. Miriam's primeval role gets wrecked over her greed for power and imposed leadership and so her essence as a sacred healing protector for the black community vanishes. Hurston implies that the equation of sacred womanhood with the Puritan rhetoric of exclusion culminates in the destruction of spirituality as a driving force. Indeed, Miriam, unable to get to grips with her fallen subjectivity will end up trading death. A death that she foresees as inevitable: "Something will happen from this" (258). Miriam's pleading to die resolves her role into that of the sacred martyr that redeems her fellow female citizens pointing to the reconfiguration of a brand new conception of sacred femininity. Her latest words of wisdom acknowledge her pitfall and the failure that has finally engulfed her sacred essence:

Ever since I spent that week outside the camp when, er –when I was a leper. When I was unclean and the leprosy and looked at myself all over and I was shut out from everything and from the living. That was when I got to thinking with only certain places in my head and I got to fleeing all over with fear (262).

Just as Hannah Crafts did with Mrs. Wheeler, Hurston's final transformation of Miriam into bare life attests to state the role of spirituality and sacredness as a major source of empowerment and a reliable force of creating a female subjectivity and feminist aesthetics that can guarantee the survival of black women's artistic power. As such, Miriam reminisces on her early days when she really was a prophetess who privileged her role to nuance and cater for the benefit of her people: "You see, I was a prophetess back in Egypt and I had power, that is what the people told me, anyhow" (263). The moment of final epiphany reveals the importance of sacredness as healing and unfolding mechanism to breed the paradigm of growth for black women. So, it is rather a fact that "Miriam had lived on hopes where other women lived on memories" and, precisely for that very reason, at the moment of her death –when her act as a redeemer has thus been accomplished– Moses publicly declares and requires social credit for her role as a leader: "Is she had not come to the palace gates to ask for him and to claim him as a brother, would he have left Egypt as he did? He doubted it" (265).

Miriam's death unravels the final destruction of a community premised on the declension that the jeremiad heralded. Moses, the leader of her people who acknowledges himself to have struggled "to make a nation out of you" (252) blurts his exclusionary nature in front of an astonished Aaron unable to grasp the nationalist bigotry and individualism that has definitely brought social havoc and the destruction of the sacred realm: "I haven't spared myself Aaron. I had to quit being a person a long time ago, and I had to become a thing, a tool, an instrument for a cause." (274).

The novel seems to be initially shaped following the jeremiad rhetoric in which the hope and the promise are to be disclosed by the next generation: “The Voice had said to take a nation across the Jordan, and the generation which he had brought out of Egypt had failed him. ‘The third generation will feel free and noble. Then I can mold a nation’” (260). However, the declension that is forecasted from the outset seems not to be reassigned as long as there are no affective bonds that can uniformly recognize the various subjectivities that compose the nation, as Moses dolefully decrees: “How can a nation speak with one voice if they are not one?” (278-279). Although this can be understood as Moses’s final acceptance of a social need that balances individualism and inclusion (Fraile Marcos, 2003: 44) I consider that Moses’s crestfallen words are to be fathomed in the context of Miriam’s death – when they are uttered. In this manner, the disappearance of Miriam is Hurston’s wily shove to grind the deluded sacred story to a halt. By and large, as a result of the lack of counterbalance of Moses’s overpower that she represented there is not only an unresolved lapse regarding gender-related conflicts but it also the moment to accept that the reality of the dream deferred has taken over: “...dreams had in no way been completely fulfilled” (282). Through the missed presence of Miriam at the very end of the story Hurston aims to convey how there is no option left to offset Moses, considering that “(n)o man on earth had ever wielded so much power” (283). The cohesive relationship that Miriam, as a sacred leader, patterned by a humanity that relates to the emotions of her fellow citizens, is broken with the imposing leadership of Moses. The declension thereby crystallizes because, in Giorgio Agamben’s terms, “breaking the identity between human and the citizen...brings the originary friction of sovereignty to crisis” (2002: 20).

Accordingly, I consider Deborah E. McDowell’s (1991: 13) assumption that in the novel “(t)he ‘place’ of women...is to be followers, and the places in which they figure ... are perhaps its most troubling” somehow reductive. Rather, I believe that Miriam’s role as a prophetess who brings to public view her sacred leadership throughout the story is by no means negligible. Slavery alongside the outcome of colonialism instituted a fresh European paradigm that established new models of leadership that were upheld at the expense of black women’s right to contribute. Here, conversely, Miriam confronts, shows off, builds upon and even transgresses Moses’s divine power only through her accorded authority. In so doing, Hurston advocates to elevate the sacredness of black feminine aesthetics vis-à-vis the folkloric ethos that got spread along the -chiefly male- intellectual quarters of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, Hurston directly forewarns, such sacred femininity needs to be always nuanced following the politics of affect, inclusion and respectability.

Through the sacred femininity that the character of Miriam personifies, we get to listen all the more to Janie’s musing in Hurston’s masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when she confesses to Jodie that “sometimes God gits familiar wind us womenfolks too and talks his inside business” (1990a: 70). In this case what God seems to eventually argue is that without the presence of women in an egalitarian dreamed society, the result is nonetheless chaotic. That is why in the last lines we get to read how the declension has been manifestly displayed and “(e)verything ended in riddles” (283).

Paradoxically powerless at the handling of his own townspeople, Moses's last moments in the story are bitterly portrayed as the metaphor of the declension per excellence. This is the resort that Hurston uses to claim the importance of female leadership within the black community –it is no wonder thus that, in a preparatory act, a female voice opens the novel.

Likewise, the scene shows, as Judylyn Ryan (2005: 71) pinpoints, how “Miriam’s influence on Moses’s life illustrates that the vision of interconnectedness persists even in relationships that are hegemonic”. Indeed, black female headship as standard bearers became pivotal for the affective spreading of the sacred message that the Sanctified Church promulgated.

If Miriam’s spiritual leadership had for so long served to appease and rule the community, Moses’s interference brings barbaric splendor to a society in which the roles of participation had already been commonly established. The bigotry of the imposed religious laws appears as a refractory tenet to a spiritual-based society directed by a woman. This idea links *Moses, Man of the Mountain* to the social reality that African American women were experiencing in the Sanctified Church. In this institution women could, as Miriam in the novel, “exercise their gifts” (2001: 82) through a shared leadership, as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes affirms. She further asserts that “(b)ecause of the special role played by these women, they often carried more authority” (Gilkes, 2001: 83) something that, again, echoes in Miriam’s first depiction. Moreover, Miriam’s affective bonds with her townspeople are likewise mirrored in the role that spiritual black women played in the Sanctified Church for they “had made cultural choices in favor of tradition to maintain their choice within the context of a like-minded constituency” (85). Put briefly, mixing spirituality, affect and black artistic aesthetics. This is precisely Hurston’s portrayal in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

Also, Hurston leaves no doubt in conveying the idea of social disruption in all almost male-centered society. Moses’s regret conforms the last throes of a leader that in his manly vision of power and individualism -the man in the mountain- has but shattered the dream of a communal society based on equality. For that very reason Moses finishes his appearance certain that “he would always feel bad about this great failure” (284). His lonely regret is also the best way to focus his guilt for premising his ideal society after the corrupted nature that goes along the exceptionalist and individualism of the white-centered North American creed as understood under his supremacy. Affect functions to debunk the “tropes of contempt” (Tomlinson, 2010: 54) that a society premised on an exclusive male leadership puts on display. Hurston’s narrative echoes Tomlinson’s theory which reads affect as a “part of the authority of a text as it is constructed within a complex matrix of institutional norms, authorial statuses, privileges, and textual features that work together” (2010: 56).

In dire contrast to individualism, Hurston elaborates her poignant critique partaking from the cultural matrix that the black vernacular tradition offered. Diverging from her contemporary fellow writers Langston Hughes’s and Richard Wright’s proletarian literature of social protest³, so popular in the Depression, Zora Neale Hurston departs her narrative from the social realism of the thirties that bolstered up the Romanticized

literary figure of the black *isolato* as the epitome of the black male hero and leader. Contrarily, Hurston opts for a feminist view of social inclusion and shared responsibilities within the heterogeneous black community and evinces that “(a)ffect is deeply entwined with creation of textual authority” (Tomlinson, 2010: 56). Through the mastering of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls “Hurston’s mythic realism” (1988: 293) her work engages the perfect conjunction that links the lyrical black idiom with the aesthetics of a certain type of black womanhood that resists to follow the ruling judgements of her black male partners. Although it has been stated that “(i)f Wright, Ellison, Brown, and Hurston were engaged in a battle over ideal fictional modes with which to represent the Negro, clearly Hurston lost the battle” (Gates, 2009: 293), the southern writer’s richly elaborated imagery has paved the path for other African American writers and has undergirded many of the topics that these actual black women have drawn from⁴.

3. Conclusion

With *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston’s narrative endeavor not only demonstrated that “it was viable for the Afro-American writer to acknowledge the folkloric oral tradition as the foundation of a genuine Afro-American writing tradition” (1997: 29) in Ana María Fraile Marcos’ words, but also warranted the importance of black women’s sacred aesthetic within the inclusionary nature of an egalitarian nation. The novel, then, extends its jeremiadic ethos and evolves into a black feminist manifesto in which a world without women equates disruption and instability. Rejecting the role of religion as a reductive mode of social protest and a technical assault of black people’s miseries— it is not in vain that she declared not to “belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood” (1979: 153) - Hurston’s mastering of sacred femininity attends to tog up black female subjectivity with the aesthetics that revolve around the vernacular ethos and the folkloric schemes “thus carrying art to the altitudes of folk-gif” (Fraile Marcos 1997: 30). By fixing African spiritual modes in the North American sacred domain Hurston places the reconfiguration of sacred femininity across the Black Atlantic. Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* acknowledges the stark difficulty of the realization of the Black City upon a Hill and foregrounds its declension by pointing to the limits of its social representation with regards to black women’s contribution.

Hurston also showcases the importance of an inclusive and ethic sacred femininity to reclaim a new type of womanhood both socially and aesthetically. Long before Daniel Coleman minted the term *white civility* to acknowledge the ways in which white North Americans had disavowed the ethnic epistemologies from participating in the construction of an egalitarian ethos of different nations⁵, Hurston’s novel focuses on a certain idea of civility within the black community. The aesthetics of the rise and fall of sacred femininity aims to collect the pieces of mutual dignity represented as a “joint responsibility of all” (Tomlinson, 2010: 57) and points home crucial points of Edward Shils’ moral concept of civility as a “feature of civil society [that] considers others as

fellow-citizens of equal dignity in their rights and obligations as members of civil society; it means regarding other persons, including one's adversaries, as members of the same inclusive collectivity" (1987: 12). Ideas that resonate aesthetically in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. For the southern writer, then, the expense in affect becomes central to the definition and reconfiguration of the sacred female ethos so that, as Sara Ahmed (2004: 24) supports, with such communal force their "bodies and worlds materialise and take shape".

Three decades before the post-colonial era, Hurston's bold representation of the sacred femininity applied to the black priestess discloses the unapologetic role of the African spirituality within the realm of the African American women and transcends Spivak's sanctioned ignorance when it comes to assure the transnational fate of the black woman. Hurston's sacred message that recasts the jeremiad tradition to pin down notions of humanitarianism, social justice and the recognition of politics of art. Affect and emotions are the tools through which Hurston's reviews and rethinks the sacred femininity offering a picture of "less the United States of promise and progress" but rather a big "community whose fundamental asset is humane recognition" (Berlant, 2004: 3).

Furthermore, the author aims to expose and revitalize the creative and healing role of black women that, as Anthonia Kalu (2002: 89) rightly asserts, were taken for granted, if not removed, "from the scene of invention and participation during a significant transitional moment in Africa's history on both sides of the Atlantic". *With Moses, Man of the Mountain* Zora Neale Hurston continues to offer her feminist rendition of the new black female self that she had outlined in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but in this occasion portraying the folkloric aesthetics of spirituality as creative agency simply to acknowledge the leadership of the sacred femininity that black women could remodel into art.

Notes

1. In *The Signifying Monkey* Henry Louis Gates Jr. coined the neologism 'speakerly text' to refer to texts that privilege black dialect as an artistic mode. Though the term has been used to convey the manifold ways in which African American writers have openly challenged imposed language and discourses, Hurston's *speakerly* representation in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, however, aims to demarcate the contours of a genuine black female aesthetics.

2. Thoth was one of the deities of the Egyptian pantheon considered as the God of magic and learning. Magic and learning are the two cultural tools that will convert Moses into a national leader. Hurston's predilection for Egyptian sources in the appraisal of black (female) subjectivity has been studied by Tina Barr in her essay "'Queen of Niggerati' and the Nile: The Isis-Osiris Myth in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*".

3. Zora Neale Hurston's anticommunist fervor alongside her decry of social protest literature turned her into a political and literary opposite to Richard Wright, the literary champion of the social protest literature. Hurston's preeminence for the unfolding of a black feminine aesthetics make her reject Wright's preponderance towards violence and hatred, his dismissal to create different black female stereotypes, his equation of art with Marxist

propaganda and his diminished capacity to accept the folkloric and artistic ethos of black dialect.

4. The literary influence of sacred femininity and biblical recasting can be grasped in, for example, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress, Indigo* or Toni Morrison's *Paradise*.

5. Coleman's rendition of white civility elucidates how whiteness, in an inchoately imperial context, became attached to the ethos of North America ever since colonial times. In this way, Coleman (2006: 10) contends, the idea of civilization gained significance through an exclusionary model of civility that adjusted "a diverse population around the standardizing ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and Britishness". The fact that Moses focuses on this white civility while Miriam draws on African spirituality is Hurston's compromise of rooting feminist aesthetics within a genuine black folklore.

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