

## In Search of Her Father's Law: Language of the Other in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses Man of the Mountain*

Madoka Kishi

Deification of Zora Neal Hurston as a Great Mother started when Alice Walker erected a gigantic black stone in the "Garden of the Heavenly Rest," where Hurston's body supposedly lies. Hurston, the flamboyant novelist-folklorist of the Harlem Renaissance once known as "Queen of the Niggeratti," is said to have died "sick and lonely, penniless and forgotten" with the ebb of interest in black art after the 40s (Hemenway 4). Impressed by Hurston's work on folklore, *Mules and Men*, Walker decided to visit her grave, only to find that there was no tombstone of Hurston in the cemetery. Unable to find the exact place where the body was, she set the stone at a "hole" which was approximately at the center of the graveyard (Walker 105). Walker's resurrection of Hurston has surely born fruit: After Walker's 1975 essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," which depicts the gravestone episode and was later included in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Robert Hemenway published Hurston's biography in 1977, and what followed was, as it were, "Zora Neale Hurston renaissance" (Washington xiii). In the late 70s and throughout the 80s, many of her work, which had gone out of print at that time, were reprinted, and her oeuvre now ranks among the canon of American female literature. Michael Awkward establishes her as an "initiator of an Afro-American women's tradition in novels" (Awkward 12), whose work has profoundly influenced Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, not to mention Alice Walker. As a body of intertextual reading between the works of Hurston and those of her literary daughters shows, Hurston's status as a fecund Great Mother has firmly taken root in African American literature criticism. But who gave birth, in the beginning, to this Great Mother?

Critics have attempted to account for this question in terms of Hurston's own relationship to her mother. The famous deathbed scene of her mother in her autobiography has always attracted critics' attention. On her deathbed the mother gives the daughter several instructions which go against the custom of the community, but the daughter cannot carry them out. "Her mouth was

slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk. But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice" (*Dust Tracks* 616). So Hurston's very act of writing is often interpreted as an attempt to give a voice to her silent mother,<sup>1</sup> and the literary matrilineage seems to be certificated. However, her writing itself suggests more; her father haunts her as well.

In the dominant Hurston scholarship, the father-daughter relationship has been largely ignored, especially on account of Hurston's own assertion in her autobiography that she was "Mama's child" (619). But at the same time the text, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, betrays the narrator's acute anxiety over the perennial dilemma between "mama's daughter" and "papa's daughter." Her appearance and behavior clearly manifest that she inherited them from nobody but her meandering father, a gifted pastor whose dramatic language once converted "as many as seventy-five in one two-week period of revival" (758). "Some children are just bound to take after their fathers in spite of women's prayers" (580), confesses Hurston, and she reveals a strange obsession for obtaining the manuscript of the town law written by her father, John Hurston.

Later on, he was to be elected Mayor of Eatonville for three terms, and to write the local laws. The village of Eatonville is still governed by the laws formulated by my father. The town clerk still consults a copy of original printing which seems to be the only one in existence now. I have tried every way I know how to get this copy for my library, but so far it has not been possible. I had it once, but the town clerk came and took it back. (569)

The law of John Hurston seems to have still wielded an absolute power over the town then, and, possibly, over Hurston herself.

In the discussion that follows, therefore, I shall attempt to shift the critical gaze from Hurston's mother-daughter relationship to the father-daughter relationship, which has been submerged in the shadow of the massive gravestone of the Great Mother. Hurston wrote two stories about the Father. One is *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a semi-autobiographical novel based on a checkered career of her father, and the other is *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, which deals with the life of the Father of Israel. In the extant Hurston scholarship which attempts to put Hurston on the throne of the progenitor of literary matrilineage, little attention has been devoted to these two novels, when compared to *Their*

*Eyes Were Watching God*, a “mother text” (Wall 662) on which critics’ interest converge. As the following part of this essay shall attest, however, examining these two works will serve to reveal the complex process of Hurston’s construction, or rather deconstruction of the authorial subjectivity through the struggle over the language of the other, which parthenogenetic myth of matrilineage alone might dismiss. The first half of my argument deals with *Jonah*, seeing it as a novel about the murder of the Primal Father, which helped the initial construction of Hurston’s authorial subjectivity. And the analysis of the snake motif in *Jonah* will lead us to the second half, which examines how in *Moses* she deconstructs her once established sense of authorship. Through intertextual reading with Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, which was published in the same year as Hurston’s *Moses*, the novel on the “great low giver” (*Moses* 337) will present itself as a text of the return of the repressed Father. When linked together, Hurston’s act of writing these two novels on the Father can be seen as an infinite literary act of searching for the Law of the Father.

### 1. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as a Text of the Original Murder

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) is a semi-autobiographical novel centering on the vicissitude of the life of John Pearson, a fictive figure modeled after Hurston’s own father, John Hurston. The close affinities between the two Johns are readily observable when we turn to her autobiography: Both John Hurston and John Pearson were born in Notasulga, Alabama, as a son of “Amy” Hurston/Crittenden and a white man, then married a spirited girl “Lucy Potts” and later settled down in Eatonville, Florida, where John became the gifted pastor of a Baptist church. And there he was bereft of his wife, who is after having long suffered from John’s promiscuity gave as she lay dying famous instructions to her daughter Zora Neale Hurston/her fictional counterpart “Isis.” Shortly after his wife’s death, Reverend Hurston/Pearson remarried a wicked woman who corrupted his life as a preacher and led him astray, so that John Hurston/Pearson divorced her and after the trying period of declining years was killed in a traffic accident. That is what the two works tell us about John.

The very fact that Zora Neale Hurston, now almost unanimously seen as a matrilineal ancestor of African American Literature, started her literary career with the story of a father deserves more than a passing notice. More noteworthy

is, however, that despite the strong resemblance between her own father and the fictional one, Hurston makes several pivotal changes to the former's life in *Jonah*, especially about his death. Examining *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, then, might shed new light on the beginning of her literary act: in rewriting her father's death and thus in murdering him literarily, Zora Neale Hurston was born, or rather borne herself, as an author.

In considering the implication of Hurston's revision of her father's death, her remarks upon the novel would provide a starting-point. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, published in May 1934, was apparently written in a rather hasty manner. Urged by the publisher Bertram Lippincott, who had read her short story "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933) and was positive of her latent talent as a novelist, she started writing the novel on July 1, 1933, and finished it on September 6 (Hemenway 189). However, one of her letters shows that the idea of the novel seemed to have been long in her mind—at least since her first research trip in 1927, when she returned to her hometown Eatonville and saw her eldest brother Bob in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>2</sup> Hurston recollects this "beautiful reconciliation" (*Dust Tracks* 685) with her long estranged brother and relates her father's death, about which she heard from him:

My father had been killed in an automobile accident during my first year at Morgan, and Bob talked to me about his last days. In reality, my father was the baby of the family. With my mother gone and nobody guide him, life had not hurt him, but it had turned him loose to hurt himself. He had been miserable over the dispersion of his children when he came to realize that it was so. We were all so sorry for him, instead of bitter as might have been expected. Old Maker had left out the steering gear when He gave Papa his talents. (685)

Unlike his fictional counterpart, John Hurston was killed not by train but by an automobile, and "the beautiful reconciliation" seems to have been between her and her father, as well as her and her brother.

What is more striking here, however, is Hurston's evasiveness about her father's "last days." Both *Dust Tracks* and *Jonah* give an account of John Hurston's remarriage occurring immediately after Lucy Hurston's death and of the succeeding catastrophe the second wife brought into the family. There was, according to *Dust Tracks*, a bloodthirsty fight between young Zora and her stepmother and after this incident, John Hurston is said to have distanced

himself from the wife and ended up divorcing. *Jonah* depicts the divorce of the couple likewise. A recent reassessment of Hurston's life, however, provides biographical facts about the relationship between John Hurston and his second wife which disprove Hurston's account. Through the interview with Hurston's niece Winifred Hurston Clerk and an examination of both Hurstons' Family Bible and the Census Report, Pam Bordelon unveils the fact that John Hurston had not divorced Mattie—the second wife named “Hattie” in *Jonah*—as Hurston depicts in both *Dust Tracks* and *Jonah*. Census verifies that Mattie was still his wife when John died in 1918, and according to Winifred Hurston Clerk, Mattie got along fairly well with John Hurston's other children. Furthermore, Bordelon maintains that John Hurston's “last days” were covered in glory in terms of his status in Eatonville: after Lucy's death in 1904, “[John] grew in stature in the Eatonville community as the pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church and was elected mayor of the town in 1912, a post he held until 1916” (Bordelon 11).

John Pearson's brutal but heroic death in *Jonah* was, then, Zora Neale Hurston's own creation; her original father John Hurston was not exiled from Eatonville, nor was he killed by the deus ex machina force of the “damnation train” (*Jonah* 150) after betraying his “third wife” who did not exist in reality. But the full meaning of this crucial revision will not be clear until we examine the whole symbology of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. For this train that kills John Pearson is a reflection of the master trope of this novel: the snake, the counterpart of the worm that encroaches on the biblical version of Jonah's gourd vine.

The title phrase of the novel comes from the Bible as Hurston herself admitted in a letter to Carl Van Vechten: “Oh yes, the title you didnt [*sic*] understand. (Jonah 4:6-10) You see the prophet of God sat under a gourd vine that had grown up in one night. But a cut worm came along and cut it down. Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone. The book of a thousand million leaves was closed” (Kaplan 291). Far from being “the book of a thousand million leaves,” the book of Jonah consists of only four verses which depict a prophet who has always attempted to escape from his duty of delivering the words of God. Whereas the Biblical Jonah's protecting plant, gourd, is smote by “a cut worm” sent by God in order to punish the prophet's arrogance, the tree of grace in Hurston's *Jonah* is to be devoured by a snake, one of her literary totems.<sup>3</sup>

Hurston's strange obsession with snakes often manifests itself in her works.<sup>4</sup> It makes her abruptly blurt out in *Dust Tracks*, quite out of context: “In

contrast to everybody about me, I was not afraid of snakes. They fascinated me in a way which I still cannot explain" (*Dust Tracks* 596). As if acting out this strange fascination, snakes regularly appear in Hurston's works. In her short story "Sweat" (1926) Hurston sets a snake in the center of the plot: a haughty man Sykes Jones who has always abused his wife Delia, plots to kill her with a snake, but it is Sykes who is actually bitten by it and dies from the poison. Also in *Seraph on the Swanee* (1948) Jim Meserve, the husband of the protagonist Arvay, tries to kill a big snake in an effort to show off his masculinity in front of his wife, only to be choked by it almost to death. More significantly, *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston's first book of folklore published later but completed earlier than *Jonah*, provides a stunning image of Zora Neale Hurston clad in snake-skin in an initiation ritual of hoodoo. In this ritual, Hurston was wrapped in snake-skin, and after sixty-nine hours of fasting and searching for the spirit, was at last united with "the Great One" within snake-skin enfolding her. On her back her mentor painted the lighting symbol that assimilates itself to the shape of the snake, and Hurston says, "this was to be my sign forever" (*Mules* 191).

*Jonah* is no exception for such snake obsession. As Lilly P. Howard correctly points out, "snakes and snake symbolism abound in *Jonah*. And whenever they appear, they portend danger and evil against which John must forever be on guard if he is to survive" (Howard 84). Alan Brown also observes that "the snake ... is an outward manifestation of the evil side of man's nature that has tempted mankind since the Garden of Eden" (Brown 80), and in his argument "the evil side of man's nature" is connected especially to John's intense sexual appetite. Brown's assumption which regards John as a tragic figure torn between the carnal and the spirit typifies the critical readings of *Jonah*,<sup>5</sup> and certainly Hurston seems to depict John, at least on a certain level, as an African American Adam who has once lived in the Edenic world but is destined to fall. Just as Adam is seduced by Eve into eating the forbidden fruit only to be exiled from Eden, John falls victim to the temptation of women's flesh, and is thrown out of the community as a fallen minister. So the snake, the original seducer of Eve, appears to be appropriate for the agent of his downfall.

In *Jonah*, the snake makes its first appearance gesturing the danger from the riverbed. John Buddy Crittenden, an illegitimate child born during slavery as a son of Amy and a white man—presumably her master Alf Pearson—is an object of the incessant hatred of his stepfather, Ned Crittenden, because of his lighter skin. When Ned tries to choke Amy who fights against him in defense of

her son, John knocks down his stepfather on the floor and decides to cross over the Creek. “G’wan, son, and be keerful uh dat foot-log ’cross de creek. De Songahatchee is strong water, and look out under foot so’s yuh don’t git snake bit” (12), warns his mother, and John swims over “de Creek” naked without actually meeting the snake, and finally reaches the land where he was born. John’s encounter with the snake is, however, only postponed. After the “symbolic baptism” (Wilson 68) of crossing over the river and being employed by Alf Pearson, John is allowed to go to school, where he is named “John Pearson” after his master/presumable father and meets his future wife Lucy Potts. When John walks Lucy home across the branch, she warns him about a snake, “dat ole devil ... skeering folks since befo’ Ah wuz borned” (*Jonah* 33). John steps down into the water and violently kills the cotton-moccasin. This action is his courting, and in killing the phallus-like snake he seems to promise her that he will abandon his infinite sexual appetite for other women and devote himself to her. But while John tries to assure Lucy of the death of the old devil, she is still frightened: “Reckon his mate ain’t gonna follow us for killin’ dis one?” (34). These words of the young prophetess are to come true, for the dead snake treads on John’s heel to keep seducing him, and he cannot abandon his lust. And the scene of snake-killing recurs in his dream even after Lucy’s death as an unfulfilled promise to torture him.

But more significantly, the dead snake pursues John, metamorphosing into another serpentine devil, which, in the end, kills him: the train. Many critics have rightly suggested the train-snake connection and observed the integral role the train plays in the text—John’s obsessive admiration for the train is underscored throughout the novel, and ultimately it is the train that takes his life.<sup>6</sup> What is not stressed is, however, that the apple the serpent induces Adam to savor is, the forbidden fruit of *knowledge*, and that the train as a transformed snake in this novel likewise tempts John into the divine knowledge of God’s word. John’s first encounter with the train occurs immediately after the initial crossing of the Creek. Held spellbound by the train which is referred to twice as “monster” (16), and “trying to keep sight of the *tail*” of it (17 italics mine), John talks to a black man standing by him:

“It say something but Ah ain’t heered it ’nough tuh tell whut it say yit. You know whut it say?”

“It don’t say nothin’. It jes’ make uh powerful racket, dass all.”

“Naw, it say some words too. Ahm comin’ heah plenty mo’ times and

den Ah tell yuh whut it say." (17)

This encounter with the snakelike monstrous train uttering strange words is the pivotal moment of the novel, for *Jonah* revolves around John's struggle through his growth of linguistic consciousness. As Gary Ciuba adequately explains, "[t]he throbbing vehicle offers neither a recognizable message to be heard nor a conventional text to be read; rather, it challenges the young language user with the pure problem of interpretation....John discerns its potential message as part of the exegesis that engages him throughout the novel" (Ciuba 120-121). After this initiation and under the protection of his white father, John acquires literacy that enables him to be the husband of the learned girl Lucy and a priest, one who interprets the inscrutable words of train/God to convey them to the ears of the people.

John's consuming passion for the train and the association between the words of the train and those of God become clearer as the novel develops. When his mother comes from the other side of the Creek to fetch him, in the depths of despair John stares at "the song book" of the choir given by Lucy's brother, who is a minister of Macedonia Baptist Church. On the cover of the book was his "crude drawing of a railroad train" (38) and he frenziedly runs to the station to hear the chant of the train once again: "Then as she pulled into the station, the powerful whisper of steam. Starting off again, 'Wolf coming! Wolf coming! Wolf Coming! Opelika-black-and dirty, Opelika-black-and dirty! Auh—wah-hooooon'—into the great away that gave John's feet such a yearning for distance" (39). This time the train's ecstatic utterance approximates to the human language to John's ears, reflecting John's own yearning for distance. John's yearning for both the train and distance is to be fulfilled when he is expelled from Notasulga on charge of stealing hogs and battering Lucy's brother. Alf Pearson gives John fifty dollars saying, "John, distance is the only cure for certain diseases" (86), and lets his prodigal son go. So excited was John at the first ride on the train that "he got off the train at every stop so that he could stand off a piece and feast his eye on the engine. The greatest accumulation of power that he had ever seen" (89). The almighty engine takes him to Sanford, Florida, where he learns to preach impersonating the preacher he saw in a church, and hearing his imitative sermon, one of his friends suggests him that he become a preacher at a "colored town" (92) in need of a minister: Eatonville.

While the train surely brings John to the Promised Land where he flourishes as a preacher, it also overdrives itself to throw him out. John's



insatiable lust for the flesh of women eventually degrades his fame as a preacher, and the remarriage with Hattie Tyson, a disreputable woman who had an affair with John while Lucy was still alive, gives John a finishing stroke. After John restores his reason and divorces her, she sues him and plots his downfall. Even his old friends forsake him, seeking to induct a more respectable pastor. Required to give a sermon to prove himself, he delivers a homily of the “wound of Jesus.”

Nowhere else in the novel than in this sermon do the secret words of the train unveil themselves more sublimely. And the sermon conflates the two central motifs, the snake and the train. Starting quietly with the prelude on the wound of Jesus, John’s final sermon accelerates itself and wildly drives through the world of the Old and New Testaments, modulating its mode from the prose in Standard English to the free verse in the dialect. With the locutionary mark “ha!” and “ah” studded everywhere, the sound of the sermon itself approximates to that of the “schickalack”ing (16) train. Departing from God’s creation of the man, the sermon fiercely runs through Lake of Galilee, the table of the Last Supper, and the house of the Pilate. Culminating its speed in the face of Jesus, the sermon finally finds a proper metaphor for itself, the “damnation train”:

I heard the whistle of de damnation train  
 Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded with cargo goin’ to hell  
 Ran at break-neck speed all de way thru de law  
 All de way thru de prophetic age  
 All de way thru de reign of kings and judges—  
 Plowed her way thru Jurdan  
 And on her way to Calvary, when she blew for de switch  
 Jesus stood out on her track like a rough-backed mountain  
 And she threw her cow-catcher in His side and His blood ditched de train  
 He died for our sins.  
 Wounded in the house of His friends.  
 That’s where I got off de damnation train  
 And dat’s where you must get off, ha! (150-1)

Jesus, the son of the ferocious God of the Old Testament, throws his body upon the train. He kills himself to stop the damnation train that set off from the “Garden of Eden,” where Adam and Eve, the first human beings, arouse the

wrath of God by eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge seduced by the old devil, snake. The catalyst of the original sin transforms itself in the shape of the train, and Jesus throws himself upon it to redeem the offspring of the original sinners.

One question we may profitably ask is why John resigns his ministry position after this sermon—by his own will. The sermon actually succeeds in driving the congregation into frenzy, so that they implore John to give the Communion. The attempt, however, proves to be in vain; “No, chillum, Ah—Ah can’t break—can’t break de bread wid y’all no mo’,” and he leaves the pulpit (152). John’s act of declining the Communion, the ceremony of internalization of Jesus by eating the bread which symbolizes His dead body<sup>7</sup>, is almost equivalent to the rejection of the communal redemption. So the ex-preacher, who describes his own sermon as “uh whole heap uh rigmarole” (152), is to be expelled from the community.

When considered in the context of the novel, for all the power and the dramatic, John’s last sermon, is indeed “rigmarole”: it stands out awkwardly from the rest of the novel. Hemenway, calling the sermon “a linguistic tour de force,” points out its problematic nature: “As we become captured by John’s language, his personal crisis—whether to remain as a man of God—fades to the background” (Hemenway 196) and “[the sermon] gives us few insights into John’s interior struggle” (198). Hemenway ascribes this dysfunction of the sermon to the fact that Hurston transplanted it from her field note almost verbatim: “it does not grow from the novelist’s trying to create an appropriate sermon for John’s crisis. It was collected from the Reverend C. C. Lovelace of Eau Gallie, Florida, on May 3, 1929, and Hurston had published it before, in her *Negro* essay” (197). His suggestion is instructive enough and contains grains of truth. Certainly, John is here made to speak somebody else’s words, not his own, so that his preaching fails to illustrate his own predicament, even if he tries to reveal himself through identifying with Jesus who bears the wound inflicted by friends. However, it is hasty to dismiss the sermon as a mere defect of the novel. On the contrary, the very fact that the discourse of the other in the form of the sermon stands at odd with the context of the novel and that John removes himself from the pulpit after the preaching speaks of nothing other than John’s dilemma from which he cannot extricate himself.

Prophets are not, despite the word’s etymology, those who make prophecy; their prophecy is only endowed by God. Their words are not of theirs, but of God, the absolute Other. Only temporarily do they keep the sacred words and

interpret them to hand down to the people. In short, they are the mouthpiece of God. Jonah, the Biblical counterpart of John, is the prophet who abhors his duty as a God's mouthpiece. Twice God punishes him for his dereliction of duty: the first agent of the punishment is the large fish, and the second is the worm which devours the protecting gourd vine. Jonah's offspring, John Pearson, too, is the man who suffers the role of God's mouthpiece. His words are always not of his own, never reflecting his inner conflict. His words, or God's words, always exceed him.

What initially made John exuberate as a pastor par excellence was an indifference toward such otherness of the language. Before the last sermon, he could casually maneuver language without ever having experienced the schism between words and what they should mean. As a quick learner who can adapt himself to language other than his own, he attempts to grasp the sound of the train as a mysterious language and later establishes himself as a gifted orator/pastor who transmits the enigmatic words of God, the absolute Other. John once experiences his sermon as a blissful moment when the words of God naturally descends to him. After the trial sermon which pushes him up to an impregnable position as a pastor of Zion Hope, John confides to Lucy: "Lucy, look lak Ah jus' found out whut Ah kin do. De words dat sets de church on fire comes tuh me jus' so. Ah reckon de angels must tell 'em tuh me" (*Jonah* 96). Even in front of the parishioners who have become distrustful of Rev. Pearson for his philandering, John can maintain his position as a spokesman of God: "When Ah speak tuh yuh from this pulpit, dat ain't me talkin', dat's de voice uh God speakin' thru me. When de voice is thew, Ah jus' uhnother one uh God's crumblin' clods" (104). Insisting on his being "uh natchel man" who only happens to have a talent to hear what God says, John barely sustains his ministry position by separating his words and his deeds. Thus he "moved down to the Communion table and in a feeling whisper went thru the sacrifice of God" (105) at this point.<sup>8</sup>

However, as mentioned earlier, John rejects the Communion after the final sermon. Looking into the abyss lying between the words he utters and what he would have conveyed to the people through those words, Rev. Pearson unfortunately awakes to the otherness of language. He at last seems to grasp the connotation of the secret words of God/train through the metaphor of the bloodstained confrontation between the damnation train and Jesus. As usual, the parishioners ecstatically consume his sermon as ethereal music. However, he, as witnesses to the murder of Jesus, wakes to the original "killing of the

thing” behind the establishment of language. Language, or the Law of the Father, erects itself through the sacrifice of the thing itself. The original is, or rather has been, lost forever. What he desperately seeks to offer in the face of his community through words would never reach them; the congregation only feast on the signifier. Having fathomed the abyss, John retreats from it. Namely, for him, the last sermon was the awakening of the schizophrenia of linguistic consciousness. He can no longer stand his duty of speaking the language of the other as a mouthpiece of God.

God, however, would never absolve the neglectful prophet from his duty. After resigning the ministry position, John seeks work as a carpenter but the community weeds out the ex-minister who has spoiled the land of communal redemption. Cast out, John forlornly moves to Plant City, where he runs across a widowed woman who welcomes him to her home. Later on, John marries this wealthy woman and it is she who encourages him to go up to the pulpit once again. Her name is “Sally Lovelace.” This marriage is, for John, or rather for Hurston, almost tantamount to the reunion between him and the discourse of the other. As Ciuba argues, “John actually weds the secret word, for his new wife bears the very name of the preacher—the Reverend C. C. Lovelace—whose sermon Hurston used as the basis of John’s valediction at Zion Hope” (Ciuba 130). By becoming Sally Lovelace’s husband, John seems to appropriate the large heritage of late Mr. Lovelace: his houses, his wife, and his words. This appropriation apparently succeeds in sweeping away John’s suffering about the otherness of language so that John flourishes once again as a minister in Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church. John’s pilgrimage, however, doesn’t end in Plant City. Again, John falls into the captive to the old devil. Recommended by Sally, John revisits Eatonville in the Cadillac she has bought him. In Eatonville, Ora, an Eve-like girl, seduces him to make love with her. On his way back to Plant City, filled with the guilt of having betrayed his wife, John drives on but “half-seeing the railroad looking inward” (167), and is run over by the train.

John’s betrayal of Sally which triggers his death is almost identical to that of Lucy, for to John, Sally is an incarnation of Lucy: “He had prayed for Lucy’s return and God had answered with Sally” (167). While his remarriage with Sally connotes John’s reunion with sacred language, his first marriage with Lucy can be seen as the original union with language. Lucy, who “kin spell eve’y word in Lippincott’s Blue-back Speller” (26), is for John an embodiment of the wisdom and the knowledge of language. “Handling Big ’Oman, Lacey, Semmie, Bootsie and Mehaley merely called for an action, but with Lucy he needed words and

words that he did not have" (31). Lucy is "words of words" (Ciuba 123) to John. Anthony Wilson's contention that Lucy is the primal agent of John's tragic bifurcation is relevant here: "Early on, Hurston conflates John's relationship with Lucy and his relationship with the church, and hence with a new vision of the spiritual....With Lucy, John develops a sense of love detached from the physical, and thus a sense of the Christian duality of body and soul that comes to torment him" (Wilson 69). Although I am not fully in accord with Wilson's assertion that John consciously has suffered from his first marriage—for the schism becomes visible only when he delivers the last sermon—it is certain that Lucy is responsible for his schism: it is she who requires John to dispense with the pre-linguistic relationship with the bodily world, offering an alternative to the language-controlled world.

Like the deserted child of Freud and Lacan's famous episode of "fort/da," who enters into the Symbolic by abandoning the existence of the mother,<sup>9</sup> John learns to prove "his new power to communicate his thoughts by scratching Lucy's name in the clay wherever he found a convenient spot" (31). On the adobe of Aunt Pheeny's chimney reads his scratching: "'Lucy,' 'Lucy Ann,' 'Lucy Potts,' 'Lucy and John,' 'Lucy is John's girl,' 'No 'nife can cut our love into,' 'Lucy Pearson'" (38). John's intense anger toward Mehaley's act of erasing the graffiti suggests his adherence to these representations. For John, who standing by the graffiti sobbingly says that "'she ain't gonna want no over-de-creek nigger'" (38), those representations are the only thing he can have control over, just as the spool is for the deserted child.

John's courting act of killing the cotton moccasin, then, resembles "castration" in two senses. On the one hand, castration is a gesture of abandoning the enormous sexual appetite—as John did in an effort to attain the love of the chaste Lucy. On the other hand, it is a rite of initiation into the world of language, or the Symbolic. What the child of "fort/da" abandons is a euphoric relationship with his mother, in which he can imagine himself as the ultimate object of her desire: Phallus. This resignation is caused not only by his sense of lonesomeness but also by the threat of the Law of the Father which forbids him incest. Under the threat of Father, the infant cannot desire to be Phallus any more, but at the same time he is now able to desire to have Phallus, which enables him to represent the lost object through the function of symbolization. Interestingly, in John's dream, the scene of killing the snake recurs in tandem with his presumable father Alf Pearson's voice:

One night John had a dream. Lucy sat beside a stream and cries because she was afraid of a snake. He killed the snake and carried Lucy across in his arm to where Alf Pearson stood at the cross roads and pointed down a white shell road with his walking cane and said, "Distance is the only cure for certain diseases," and he and Lucy went racing down the dusty white road together. (155)

Distancing himself from the thing itself, and thereby castrating himself, John offers himself upon the altar of Lucy, the embodiment of the language-controlled world. To put it another way, He transforms the dead snake into language and in so doing gains "the word that he did not have" (31).

After losing Lucy and then parting with the language, he apparently extricates himself from the otherness of language and reunites with it through Sally, the alter ego of Lucy. However, the false appropriation of language of the other is to be punished; language must always remain the Other's. God has the authority of the words and never forgives the treacherous prophet who claims property other than his. Thus the Biblical Jonah's gourd vine withers: so does John's. The Godlike train runs over him, executing the fraudulent prophet who has fondly imagined that he could be the master of the words. His dead body is not allowed to speak anything of his predicament; Sally Lovelace, weeping hard, says "Ah got one consolation, he sho wuz true tuh me....Ah'll never regret uh thing. He wuz true tuh me" (167). As the bread of the Communion symbolizes the dead body of the sacrificed detached from the original dead body to redeem the sinners, John's body becomes a symbol deprived of its existence. Zion Hope which once expelled him arranges the memorial for John Pearson, setting "the flower-banked chair that represented the body of Rev. Pearson" (168). The community is held together once again by the dead body of John.

It is worth noting that the agent of his final succumbing is named Ora, who keeps calling him "daddy." The daughter Zora/Ora seems to cleverly make John violate the Law of the Father twofold: not only does he contrive to cancel the otherness of language, but he also commits incest. Perhaps, in writing *Jonah*, Hurston succeeded in usurpation of the literary language from her father: by depicting her father as an offender against the Law of the Father and punishing him on behalf of the Law garbed in her literary totem snake-skin, she has established herself as a guardian of the language of the other. Thus in narrating her father's life and death in her own way and thereby murdering him

literarily, Zora Neale Hurston gains control over her father and becomes the novelist, who administers the world of symbolic meaning. Howard insightfully observes that “perhaps it [the writing of *Jonah*] was ... a real, though subconscious, therapeutic effort to rid herself of her ambivalent feelings toward her father.... Hurston believed her father to be, like her protagonist, a victim rather than a criminal offender” (Howard 90-91). But Howard is not totally accurate when she says that “it is *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, then, that the conflict between father and daughter is finally resolved” (91). The resolution, be it final or not, is to be carried over in another story of Father, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

## 2. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* as a Text of the Return of the Repressed

Just as Hurston’s first story of Father *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* sprouts from the Biblical soil, another story of Father signals itself from the Biblical mountain. This time, its protagonist is Moses, the Father of Israel. While *Jonah* only alludes to the Bible mainly by its title, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) attempts directly to rewrite the Biblical legends. Hurston begins the novel with an introduction, declaring the concept of the novel:

Moses was an old man with a beard. He was the great lawgiver. He had some trouble with Pharaoh about some plagues and led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and on to the Promised Land. He died on Mount Nebo and the angels buried him there. That is the common concept of Moses in the Christian world.

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character. They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. (337)

As Timothy P. Caron succinctly summarizes, *Moses* “is an empowering revoicing of the Exodus story that responds to the white South’s racist biblical interpretive communities by appropriating a key figure from the Bible, by intertextually recasting Moses as an African-American liberator” (Caron 83). Needless to say, however, it is not Hurston’s innovation to rewrite the Moses legend; there exists the long-standing African American tradition of identifying

the oppressed Hebrew with the African American suffering under the slavery and its postbellum correlative Jim Crow, as a number of spirituals that depicts Moses as the emancipator powerfully illustrates. Hurston's use of African American dialect in this novel reinforces this identification, but at the same time, the novel's satirical tone over the conflict between Moses as a reluctant liberator and his ever grumbling people caused unfavorable reviews at the time of its publication. Alain Locke dismissed it as "caricature instead of portraiture," and Ralph Ellison deplored that "this work set out to do for Moses what 'The Green Pastures,' did for Jehovah; for Negro fiction it did nothing" (Hemenway 273). Recent criticism of *Moses*, by contrast, rightly appreciates the text's complex strategy of destabilizing the monolithic concept of racial identity, especially considering the historical context—the rise of fascism in Europe—in which the novel was written.<sup>10</sup> Although these criticisms which secure *Moses* as an elaborate political allegory is highly plausible, there seems few attempt to associate the novel with other novels Hurston wrote, considering the novelist's personal, compelling need to produce it as a novel. But reading *Moses* by exploring the intricate relation with *Jonah* will serve to reveal Hurston's difficult process of reforming herself as a novelist, who deals with language of the other.

In her attempt to give a voice to Africa so that she can recast the biblical saga, Hurston presents Moses as a hoodoo man par excellence. This view of Moses as an outstanding conjure man has already appeared in *Jonah*. Deacon Harris, asked by Hattie whether he believes in hoodoo, says: "Yeah, Ah do, Mrs. Rev'und. Ah done seen things done. Why hit's in de Bible, Sister! Look at Moses. He's de greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made...Ya, indeed, Sister Pearson. De Bible is de best conjure book in de world" (*Jonah* 124). And on September 1934, shortly after the publication of *Jonah*, Hurston wrote "The Fire and The Cloud," a short story which depicts the last moment of Moses, who talks with a lizard on Mount Nebo. But it was not until after the research trip to Haiti, on which she published the folklore book *Tell My Horse* (1938), that she developed the concept further. In Haiti, she met Moses who is worshipped as the "serpent god" (*Moses* 337): "Moses had his rod of power, which was a living serpent. So that in every temple of Damballa there is a living snake, or the symbol" (337). Hurston, five years after the publication of her first and snake-haunted novel, still seems to have been haunted by the snake.

Besides this revision of Moses as a hoodoo man, Hurston poses another radical challenge to the Bible: Moses as an Egyptian. Whereas the Bible presents Moses as a Hebrew fortunately adopted by an Egyptian princess,



Hurston rejects this notion. Hurston's Moses is a noble Egyptian, a son of the Egyptian princess and Assyrian prince. And it is a lie told by a Hebrew girl Miriam, on which Hebrews, knowing the improbability of the girl's story, create the legend of a "Hebrew in the palace" (371) in order to survive their hardship of slavery. Thus Hurston ascribes the Christian concept of the Hebrew Moses to the communal desire of Hebrews.

Surprisingly enough, there is another person contemporaneous with Hurston who imagined an Egyptian Moses and interpreted the notion of the Hebrew Moses as a collective illusion of Hebrews: Sigmund Freud. In 1937, two years before the publication of Hurston's *Moses*, Freud published two essays on *Imago* which were later collected in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), one of the most controversial and perhaps the least accepted books by Freud. Freud himself was well aware of the unorthodoxy and eccentricity of the book, so much so that he gave the first draft the title: *The Man Moses, a Historical Novel* (Freud 3). In this book, Freud revitalized a theory of the primal history scene which he drew in *Totem and Taboo* (1912). First, he portrays Moses as a noble Egyptian who defends the monotheistic religion rooted in Ikhnaton era, the religion which was outlawed in his time. And he confers it upon those who have been deprived of their God: the oppressed Hebrews. After having been liberated by Moses, however, the Hebrews begin to rebel against the strictness of the religion Moses imposed upon them, then murder him and try to forget the whole memory of him including his religion. As Freud shows in *Totem*, the murder of the Primal Father is, once it is repressed, only to haunt the murderer and returns in a more abstract and absolute form. Thus the Egyptian Moses is fused with the second Moses, a Midianite priest and a son-in-law of Jethro, and it is he who establishes the foundation of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Despite its remarkable idiosyncrasy—or, perhaps for the very perplexing idiosyncrasy itself—this strange coincidence with Hurston's and Freud's conception of Moses as an Egyptian remains almost neglected in Hurston scholarship. Hemenway does suggest the uncanny contemporaneity of Freud's theory and Hurston's fiction, saying that "Hurston may have read Freud's articles, or she may have come to her vision independently; whatever her source, she clearly holds that Moses was an Egyptian whom Jewish myth undertook to transform into a Jew" (Hemenway 257). Still, he doesn't delve into the implication of Hurston-Freud connection. Barbara Johnson is a rare exception reading the two books of Moses in the light of intertextuality. In her groundbreaking essay, Johnson poses a provocative question: "Why would

either Freud or Hurston *want* Moses to be an Egyptian? If Moses is the object of a cultural idealizing transference both for Jews and for blacks, what is the significance of this separation between the idealized leader and the people he liberates?" (Johnson 15, italics original).

According to Johnson, to consider the backgrounds of their writing offers the key to this question. Freud wrote his essays under the protection—and at the same time under the repression—of the Catholic Church, fearing that “the publication of [his] work would result in the loss of that protection” (Freud 57). “Then, suddenly came the German invasion,” says Freud, “and Catholicism proved, to use the words of the Bible, ‘a broken reed’” (57). He is expelled from his homeland because of his race, and this enforced migration to England enables him to “speak and write ... as [he] wish[es] or [he] must” (57). In illustrating Moses as an Egyptian, not the descendent of Joseph, Freud directly opposes the patriarchy of Christianity. Johnson hence acutely argues that “Freud, in a gesture that itself resembles an Oedipal murder, replaces the primal Jewish father with a non-Jew” (Johnson 21). Also Hurston’s attempt to represent Moses the Egyptian defies the long-established African American tradition, for in this tradition, Moses is seen as a fellow liberator who rescues his people—that is, those of the same race as his—from the oppression of slavery. Then, Hurston’s writing of *Moses*, too, resembles “an Oedipal murder.”

However, in considering the implication of Hurston’s “Oedipal murder” in *Moses*, we should not confine our intertextual reading within the relationship between the two books—or three books, including the Bible as Johnson does—of Moses; *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain* should be positioned in relation to *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as well. As Johnson explains, the three books of Moses are haunted by the motif of rewriting. The original text Bible itself provides twice-written stone tablets of the Ten Commandments; Freud wrote his essay twice, first in Austria, then in England; and Hurston too, “has Moses write twice, not only in the traditional scene (to which she devotes very little attention) but also in a strange supplementary scene that occupies a central place in the novel” (Johnson 25), which indicates the scene where he rewrites the “Book of Thoth,” a point to which we shall return later. In this novel, however, Hurston herself, as well as her protagonist, attempts to rewrite the primal text: her first novel.

Few critics have observed the interrelation of the two novels, but Ann Rayson remarks the similarity between the two protagonists: “it [*Moses*] continues the character development of the Southern black preacher—womanizer with a gift for oratory and charm. Secondly, [it] reintroduces the

theme of petty men versus real men” and it is thus “a natural outgrowth of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*” (Rayson, qtd. in Howard 113). Rayson’s assertion that Moses is modeled after John Pearson—who himself is made after John Hurston—seems quite accurate. Hurston surely renders Moses a natural man who has sexual appetite, which its source book the Bible never admits. The Ethiopian Princess, the wife of the marriage of convenience, “[does] not awaken the urge in him to give her the pain and tenderness that makes up a marriage” (*Moses* 393) and fascinated by the sensual second wife Zipporah, Moses even twice inclines to escape from his duty as a liberator of the Hebrews, and is reproached by his step-father, Jethro. He has also suffered the rebellion of the people he liberated, and the conflict between the leader and his community becomes one of the major themes of the novel. However, unlike John Pearson who has suffered from his lust all his life and is expelled from the community, Moses overcomes both the carnal desire and the antipathy of the people to transcend his literary precursor. Surely, Moses is the “outgrowth” of John. But the affinity between *Jonah* and *Moses* does not confine itself within their protagonists’ sexual appetite and their collision with the communities; these works share two central tropes: the crossing over and the snake.

Two works cross each other, in the first place, with the scene where the protagonists cross over the water after having been reproached for the impurity of their blood. As mentioned earlier, John crosses over the Creek after knocking down his step-father who has always abused him saying “[John] don’t even know his pappy” (*Jonah* 40) and calls him “yaller god” (5), “punkin-colored bastard,” and “half-white youngun” (10). Moses, an Egyptian prince, is an object of the incessant jealousy of his uncle, Ta-Phar, who spreads a virulent rumor that Moses is a Hebrew. On hearing the rumor, his Ethiopian wife vehemently condemns him and the rage aroused by her remarks makes Moses lose self-control. Walking out of the palace, he sees an Egyptian overseer cruelly tormenting a Hebrew labor, and the nausea caused by the scene makes him strike the overseer so fiercely that he kills him. Learning about this incident, Pharaoh tries to have Moses assassinated, so Moses has to leave Egypt. As the scene of John’s crossing over is narrated in highly lyrical tone, the description of Moses’ crossing over becomes almost a chant with the repetition of the phrase “he had crossed over”:

Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over. The short sword at his

thigh had a jeweled hilt but he had crossed over and so it was no longer the sign of the high birth and power. He had crossed over, so he sat down on a rock near the seashore to rest himself. He had crossed over so he was not of the house of Pharaoh. He did not own a palace because he had crossed over. He did not have an Ethiopian Princess for a wife. He had crossed over. He did not have friends to sustain him. He had crossed over. He did not have enemies to strain against his strength and power. He had crossed over. The sun who was his friend and ancestor in Egypt was arrogant and bitter in Asia. He had crossed over. He felt as *empty as a post hole* for he was none of the things he once had been. He was a man sitting on a rock. He had crossed over. (*Moses* 409-410, italics mine)

What emerges through the persistent repetition is an incantation which reduces Moses into "nobody," whereas John's crossing over to his birthplace transforms him into "somebody," particularly a son of his biological father Alf Pearson. Expelled from his pseudo-father for the impurity of blood, John crosses over the Creek and meets his "real" father who endows him with the clothes of his legitimate son Alfred, then his own, and the notebook of plantation management which he primarily intended to entrust to Alfred (45); Moses undresses himself only to become "empty as a post hole." "Highlighted through this repetition of words is the flight of the text after itself, a building of cyclic power like a gyre, tightening and winding its coils a massive energy," says Karla Holloway, and "it is a structure at the pinnacle of the semiological relationship between the signifier and that which is signified upon, because, in the coiling, the distinction between the two is lost" (Holloway 41-2). Johnson seems to concur with Holloway: "To achieve the status not of a sign but of a signifier, Moses undergoes the cancellation of all he signifies" (Johnson 24). Though both Holloway's and Johnson's argument offer a fruitful means of understanding of the scene, it is not sufficient to say that "[Moses] has become as empty as *a hole*" (Johnson 24, italics mine). What he becomes is not merely "a hole" but "a post hole" which looks forward to having its emptiness filled with a "post." And the post will soon penetrate the hole, again in the form of the Phallic snake.

John, who has been fascinated by the snake-like train, is killed by it in the end. As has been already suggested in the foregoing argument, the snake-like train embodies the otherness of language: in an effort to exorcise it and appropriate the discourse of the other, John is murdered for his ambitious

misappropriation. The executioner of his death was his daughter attired in the skin of her totem, and through this literary murder she establishes herself as the novelist Zora Neale Hurston. But as Freud theorized in *Totem* and later performed it in *Moses and Monotheism*, the murdered original father always haunts the murderer—the repressed is only to return, but this time, in a more abstract form. The Hebrews who had murdered Egyptian Moses regretted the murder, so that they fused him with the later religious founder and equipped him with the name of Moses. In a similar vein Hurston murdered the Primal Father and resurrected him. The man who was resurrected is equipped with the almighty rod which takes after the executioner of the Primal Father. This man is Hurston's Moses, worshipped as a “serpent god” (*Moses* 337).

As noted earlier, what makes people among Africa, America, and the West Indies tremble in awe is Moses' “rod of power.” The rod is endowed on the Mount Sinai by the Lord, who declares “I AM WHAT I AM” (455) and commands Moses to pick up a snake squirming in front of him. When he timidly picks it up it becomes a wooden stick and when he drops it on the ground, it again becomes a living snake. “It was his, he knew by the feel of it. It was the rest of him” (454). So he achieves the “rest of him,” a post which compensates for the emptiness of “a post hole.” According to Northrop Frye, in discussing the Biblical Exodus, “a brazen serpent is placed on a pole by Moses as preservation against the fatal bite of ‘fiery serpents’ (Num. 21:9) ... with an underlying association between the lethal serpents and the serpent of Eden” (Frye 172). The snake which trails John from the Garden of Eden to kill him is tamed in the hand of Moses, bestowing the enormous power on him.

However, before God's bestowal of the snake rod, Hurston's Moses has already proved himself to be a skillful tamer of the snake. In the preceding chapters Moses has journeyed to Koptos, in search of “the book of Thoth” which his mentor Mentu told him about when Moses was still in the palace. The book was written by the Egyptian god of wisdom Thoth himself, containing all the secret words which promise its reader infinite power. It lurks in the middle of the Nile at Koptos, guarded by “a deathless snake” (388). In Koptos, he vehemently fights with the snake, and finally, “late in the third day, he beat the snake and commanded the snake to meet him anywhere in the world that he might call. So the snake did not appear to resist him anymore” (448). In contrast to his literary precursor John Pearson, who kills the snake and is to be haunted by it, Moses doesn't kill the snake; he only tames it. Besides, he seems to have succeeded in taming that rebellious daughter, the attendant of the

snake. Before confronting the deathless snake, he makes offering to "Isis of Koptos" (447) cleverly enough. What we should recall here is that in *Jonah*, John's daughter—Hurston's fictional counterpart—is named "Isis," the same name as that of the Egyptian goddess who resurrects her husband's body that has been torn and thrown away in the Nile<sup>11</sup>. So without haunted neither by the snake nor by the goddess/daughter, Moses gains secret words of the book of Thoth.

Seen in this light, one may safely say that in Hurston's *Moses*, the power of Moses does not solely emanate from God. Adding a supplemental scene to the Bible, Hurston reduces the impact of God's bestowal of the snake-rod. By depicting Moses as a man who has already tamed the snake, she cancels the soleness of God's authority. The same may be said, no doubt, of the whole novel. Throughout the novel, the power and authority of God are weakened compared with the original text. Howard observes that "interestingly, God as a character does not figure largely in this reproduction of the biblical saga....And strangely enough, Moses seem to have acquired most of his supernatural skills not from God's but from other, more worldly sources" (Howard 116-7). Not only does Hurston ascribe the "supernatural" skills to something other than God, but she even reduces "supernatural" events to natural phenomena. Moses' initial crossing of the Red Sea is not the miracle caused by God's unseen hand, but the result of the low-tide of which an old man informs Moses in exchange of money (409). Also, Moses sweetens water not by the Lord's instruction but by his knowledge about chemical change (518). In contrast to *Jonah* which is ruled by the iron hand of God, in *Moses*, it is "THAT MIGHTY HAND" (338) of Moses that controls the plot.

Furthermore, this mighty hand does not reconcile itself to the position of a symbol:

"Moses had lifted his right hand in Midian and the people feared it. The first few times that he made the gesture before a miracle nobody noticed it particularly. But when it kept on happening, that right hand became a sign of power of terror and wonders. Then it quit being a sign of power to the people; it became to them power itself." (445)

The right hand which does not commit the killing of the snake—or rather the killing of the thing—is never to be subjugated to the Symbolic. What it summons up is not the alternative representation of the lost, but the Presence

itself: "it had a separate existence from the rest of his body. So when Moses lifted his right hand the smoke of the incense ceased to be smoke. It became the Presence" (446). Naturally, the mighty hand of the Presence never allows his people to worship an idol, a false representation of the Presence. While Moses climbs the Mount Sinai to attain the Ten Commandments, Hebrews have Aaron cast a golden calf and feast on it. "The calf and all its meaning and all thoughts it collected glimmered and winked at Moses from its alter" (549) so Moses clashes it with the stone tablets on which lies the Ten Commandments and in breaking the idol, he destroys the sacred tablets themselves. However, the renewed tablets Moses brings become God themselves: "Moses took the tables of testimony into the tabernacle and the pillar of cloud went in behind Moses and rested on the altar. So that was the first time that God had come inside the house to live with people" (554). What actually "comes inside the house" is of course the stone tablets of the Law, and here the Law is equated with God. Moses' right hand hence succeeds in bringing down the Law that enfolds the Presence of God.

As Johnson points out, Hurston may have "consciously identified with Moses." In a letter to Guggenheim Foundation, Hurston wrote that "the desire to write a definite study of voodoo was like 'a burning bush' flaming inside her" (Johnson 18)—a direct reference to the initial theophany that happened to Moses. The right hand which brings out the Presence of the thing is an object of the novelist's unfulfilled dream. Novelists are those who re-present the lost with their right hands, wistfully looking back on the Eden they left behind—or perhaps, Eden is a place which emerges only when they conceive themselves as having been expelled from there. So, however desperately the novelist Zora Neale Hurston seeks to identify her right hand with that mighty hand of Moses, hers will never summon up the Presence. What it could summon up is, at best, an illusion. Hurston herself may have been aware of this, and perhaps it is this awareness that set her to develop an idiosyncratic character, who is the originator of the legend of Moses: Miriam the prophetess. Possibly, it is this figure, rather than Moses, with whom Hurston may have identified.

It is no exaggeration to say that the uniqueness of Hurston's story of Moses, which differentiates itself both from the Bible and Freud's *Moses*, lies in her innovation of the role of Miriam. The very legend that Moses is a Hebrew derives from her. In the beginning of the novel, Pharaoh enacts a law that prohibits the birth of the Hebrew boy. "Hebrew women shuddered with terror at the indifference of their wombs to the Egyptian law" (341), and from a certain

rebellious womb is a boy born. Jochebed, the mother of the boy and Aaron and Miriam, wouldn't allow her son to be killed. So she decides to leave the baby in the basket at the Nile, telling her daughter Miriam to keep an eye on it. Unlike the watchful daughter of the Bible, Hurston's Miriam snoozes and when she wakes up, the basket has gone. Then the Princess comes for her bathing. Miriam, who is fascinated by Princess's charm and completely forgets about her helpless brother, finds "a dark, oval object" (364). She thinks that it is a casket in which the things for washing are kept, and that servants must have carelessly forgotten to bring it home. After she returns home in ecstasy of meeting the beautiful Princess, Jochebed frantically demands the whereabouts of her son. Miriam, fearing the reproach, blurts out: "you see, mama, while I was asleep, the basket with your baby in it floated down-stream and the Princess saw it and took him home to the palace with her" (366). Of course she lies. However, her act of powerfully grasping the floating signifier of "a dark oval object" and stuffing it with a tempting meaning captures the mind of Hebrews. So "the Hebrew in the palace" becomes the legend and the girl becomes the prophetess of the community, who skillfully decodes the meanings of symbols.

But again, like the prophet of *Jonah* is, the prophetess is doomed to be defeated. Jealous of Moses and his wife Zipporah, Miriam once plots to expel Zipporah. Moses punishes her arrogance with the curse of leprosy, putting her outside of the community for seven days. After the expulsion, she is haunted by Moses' right hand. "Now and then she would whisper to whoever happened to be closed around. 'He lifted his right hand. I saw him do. He lifted his right hand and *the thing* come upon me. I felt it when it come. His right hand was clothed in light'" (558 italics mine). She who controls the symbol is to grovel in front of the thing itself.

Despite her defeat—or perhaps all the more because of it—Hurston's text highlights the death of Miriam almost to the extent that it bears a kind of heroic solemnity, while the Bible—not to say Freud's text which speaks nothing of her—devotes only one line to it. One day, on the desert of Zin, Miriam visits the tent of Moses for the first time after the leprosy. She silently but persistently asks Moses to let her die. Moses seems to be perplexed at her demand and asks her, "Do you think that I am God, Miriam?" And replies Miriam: "Indeed, I don't know, Moses. That's what I been trying to figure out for years....Sometimes I thought God's voice in the tabernacle sounded mighty much like yours" (573). What these words of the originator of the Moses legend suggests is that even God might be the outcome of a collective illusion. After



talking with Moses, she moves to the door.

“Much obliged, Moses. Now I can go.”

“Much obliged for what, Miriam?”

“I felt your right hand fall from over me. I’m going on back to my tent and rest.” (574)

Her last prophecy is granted: “Miriam went back and laid down just like she said she would, and the next morning they found her dead with a bitter twist on her mask of a face” (574). The prophetess dies to grant her own words, and to prove the power of Moses’ right hand. From the beginning, it was Miriam’s words that made Moses what he is. On his way back from her funeral, Moses himself thinks: “He wondered if she had not been born if he would have been standing here in the desert of Zin. In fact, he wondered if the Exodus would have taken place at all....A mighty thing had happened in the world through the stumblings of a woman who couldn’t see where she was going” (575). According to Frye, the name Miriam connotes the mother of Jesus: “the third Sura of the Koran appears to be identifying Miriam and Mary, Christian commentators on the Koran naturally say that is ridiculous, but from the purely typological points of view from which the Koran is speaking, the identification makes good sense” (Frye 172). Hurston’s Miriam is, in a sense, a Virgin Mary who conceives Moses in the womb of a lie. So in a gesture similar to enshrining his mother’s tomb, he orders a great tomb for Miriam: “she needed a big tomb so the generations that come after would know and remember her” (575).

After all, the novelist Zora Neale Hurston herself is a Miriam-like prophetess who interprets the sacred words of the other and hand them down to the reader of her novel. Her eyes had been yearningly watching God, who never allows her to have that mighty hand of Moses from which the Law of the Father emanates. She would never be able to obtain the Law, nor would she appropriate the language of the other. But she can, certainly, act out her lie as Miriam does, powerfully assigning attractive meanings to the language of the other. At the end of her project of rewriting the Biblical saga, Hurston made a radical interpretation on the Bible. According to the Deuteronomy, God forbids Moses to enter the Promised Land. “So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day” (Deut: 34:5-6). Hurston grasped this last line and giving it another meaning: nobody knows where his body is because he doesn’t die—not

at least there.

Hurston's Moses goes up to the Mount Nebo not according to the command of God, but by his own will. From the summit, he looks down at the camp of the Hebrews, recollecting his life. He thinks:

He was still hale and strong. None of his natural powers had failed him yet. He had ten good active years ahead of him, barring the accident. Maybe twenty years....But one day he must not die as other men died. And they looked upon him as different from other men and followed him only through fear and awe. When he sickend and crumbled like ordinary men, what would become of his laws and statutes? No, Moses must not die among the Hebrews. They must not see him die. (593)

So Moses begins to build his own tomb on Mount Nebo. "He would end in mystery as he had come. Then his laws would stand" (593). He decides to kill himself in behalf of the Law. However, he changes his mind. In collecting the stones to build his tomb, he finds an old lizard under one stone. The lizard informs him of another old lizard living on Mount Sinai, who is "a keeper of our memories" (594) and even knows "how the world was made, and heavens" (594). Then Moses decides to go back to Mount Sinai to ask the lizard questions about the beginning of the world. "The voice of the thunder leaped from peak to plain and Moses stood in the midst of it and said 'Farewell.' Then he turned with a firm tread and descended the other side of the mountain and headed back over the years" (595). Thus Hurston reenacts the enigmatic Biblical phrase, "but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day," giving it an alternative meaning, so that the novel ends without killing the Father. He who is not murdered will not haunt the novelist.

As we have seen, Hurston primarily had borne herself as a novelist in a literary act of murdering her father in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. In narrating his life and assigning his death a symbolic meaning, she usurped the poetic language of her father and was ostensibly through with him. However, the repressed murder haunted her and the dead father returned, this time in a more abstract form. The return of the repressed reaches its fruition in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and its protagonist Moses overcomes all the defects John had. And Hurston herself did not repeat a mistake she made in *Jonah*: In the same

gesture as Moses tames the snake without killing it, she reconciled with the Father without killing him. Moses' tombstone, like Phallus, erects itself magnificently but meaninglessly, for beneath the stone there is nothing—strangely enough, similar to Hurston's own, which Alice Walker built later without ever finding the exact place where Hurston's body lies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most representative of these studies is Françoise Lionnet, who maintains that "[t]he death scene of the speechless mother becomes the motivation for writing" (Lionnet 1116). Gates (183), Ciuba (119), Holloway (118), hold the similar views.

<sup>2</sup> Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway comments that "She also admitted that the story had been in her mind since 1929" (Hemenway 188), but her March 24, 1927 letter to Dorothy West suggests that she is writing on a novel—and Carla Kaplan, the editor of her letters, speculates that "a novel" may refer to *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. (Kaplan 95)

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Speisman regards the Biblical worm as snake itself: "In many religions the worm is considered a representative of snake" (Speisman 89). However, without further evidence we cannot develop this notion in this argument.

<sup>4</sup> Speisman and Keith Cartwright also point out the significance of snake-motif in Hurston's work, especially connecting it with Hurston's keen interest in Voodoo.

<sup>5</sup> Howard likewise observes that "[t]he direction of the story is determined by [John's] insatiable desire for the flesh of the women and the tension that exists between the desire and his desire for the ministry and the Word of God" (Howard 75). Anthony Wilson emphasizes the dichotomy of the bodily and the spiritual in the novel—especially the latter encroaching and repressing the former—regarding the modernization as an evil and irresistible force that makes John sacrifice the bodily, prelapsarian intuitive wholeness.

<sup>6</sup> Speisman maintains that "[t]he train, which appears throughout the novel, provides another symbolic representation of the snake" (Speisman 90), and Howard points out the similarity between the descriptions of John's snake-killing and that of John's own death in the train accident, implying that the death of John can be seen as a revenge of the dead snake transformed in the shape of train (Howard 85). But neither of them further delves into the meaning the train metaphor carries in the novel. Only Ciuba who suggests that "the novel's many snake images converge in [the] final mechanical worm" (Ciuba 130), carefully analyses the train metaphor in John's last sermon as well as his first encounter with it and the train's killing of John, but he fails to fully explain why the snake has to transform into the train to kill John, though his argument that in this novel, language is central to the plot is plausible

enough and corresponds with mine.

<sup>7</sup> Freud regards the rite of Communion as a relic of "totem meal": "the Christian ceremony of Holy Communion, in which the believer incorporates the Saviour's blood and flesh, repeats the content of the old totem meals—no doubts only its affectionate meaning, expressing of veneration, and not in its aggressive meaning" (Freud 87). Herself an anthropologist, Hurston held the same view. She wrote to Franz Boas: "Is it safe for me to say that baptism is an extension of water worship as a part of pantheism just as the sacrament is an extension of cannibalism?" (Kaplan 137).

<sup>8</sup> John's entering into sermoning will be another illustration of his joyful nonchalance about delivering the discourse of others. As mentioned earlier, John starts delivering sermons by impersonating the preacher he saw at Sunday Church in Sanford. "On Sunday John and his breaster went into town to church.... Back in camp that night, John preached the sermon himself for the entertainment of the men who had stayed in camp and he aped the gestures of the preacher so accurately that the crown hung half-way between laughter and awe" (91). His first sermon was ventriloquism "for the entertainment." Also, what makes him beat Rev. Felton Cozy, his competitor supported by his opponent Deacon Harris, is his highly performative language, not its meaning (132). For him, language is sheerly performative. John's words were consumed like music, mere signifiers, entertaining the ear of the congregation regardless of its meaning.

<sup>9</sup> As Freud and Lacan have shown through the famous episode of "fort/da," language, the ultimate symbol, emerges in the very act of the veiling of the lost object. The deserted infant has a spool represent the absent mother through the play of throwing and retrieving it, yelling "fort (absent)/da (present)." In so doing he manages to symbolically handle the absence/presence of his mother, thus to control the object. However, such a control enables itself only through the abandonment of the object: in order to control the object, it must be "lost." The subject acquires representation only through the abandonment of the existence of the mother, or "the thing itself." The acquisition of language then means two things: on the one hand, the subject abandons a euphoric relationship with the mother and the thing itself, suffering the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, at the sacrifice of the death of the thing itself, the subject gains a magical stick which evokes an illusionary representation of the lost object. And in order to handle this magical stick, one has to cross the threshold of the Symbolic. The representation/symbol which is established through the killing of the thing is structured in such a way that it enfolds a void in its center. The signifier itself does not signify anything. An arbitrary signifier/symbol becomes, however, the source of foundation of community when it is organized in the form of the communal code of language. So language, the enormous network of symbolization, is always already somebody else's: it bears the otherness, so much so that the subject can never fully articulate himself through words. There always remains a vast schism between the words and what they should have signified. See

Jacque Lacan "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits* 237-268, for more detailed discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Blyden Jackson observes that "[f]or intensity, bitterness, truculence, and stridency of tone [endemic to African American protest novel, *Moses*] substitutes humor and, on the strength of that substitution alone, confers upon itself something of a distinction among all poetry and the prose ever written by American blacks" (Jackson 156). Caron sees "a politically liberating laugh" in this novel, which destabilize the stiff interpretation of the Southern white Protestantism, which has depended on Bible for its defense of slavery (Caron 86). Mark Christian Thompson and Barbara Johnson emphasize the historical background of Hurston's writing of the novel, and Thompson points out fascistic nature not only in Egyptian Pharaoh, but also in Moses himself.

<sup>11</sup> Hurston also used the name "Isis" for her fictional alter ego in her short story "Drenched in Light" (1924).

### Works Cited

- Awkward, Michael. *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Bordelon, Pam. "New Tracks on Dust Tracks: Toward a Reassessment of the Life of Zora Neale Hurston." *African American Review* 31.1 (1997):5-21.
- Brown, Alan. "'De Beast' Within: The Role of Nature in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." Glassman and Seidel 76-85.
- Caron, Timothy P. *Struggles over the Word*. Macon: Mercer UP, 2000.
- Ciuba, Gary. "The Worm against the Word: The Hermeneutical Challenge in Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." *African American Review* 34.1 (2000): 119-133.
- Cartwright, Keith. "'To Walk with the Storm': Oya as the Transformative 'I' of Zora Neale Hurston's Afro-American Callings." *American Literature* 78. 4 (2006): 741-767.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism: An Outline of Psycho-Analysis and Other Works*. Trans. James Starachey. London: Hogarth, 1964.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Glassman, Stevens, and Kathryn Lee Seidel, eds. *Zora in Florida*. Orlando: U of Central Florida P, 1991.
- Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1977.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. Wall, *Hurston: Folklore, memoirs, and Other Writings*. 557-808.

- . *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. 1934. Wall, *Hurston: Novels and Stories*. 1-172.
- . *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. 1939. Wall, *Hurston: Novels and Stories*. 335-596.
- . *Mules and Men*. 1935. Wall, *Hurston: Folklore, memoirs, and Other Writings*. 1-268.
- Holloway, Carla F.C. *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Greenwood, 1987.
- Howard, Lilly P. *Zora Neale Hurston*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.
- Jackson, Blyden. "Moses, Man of the Mountain: A Study of Power." *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1986. 151-155.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Moses and Intertextuality: Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Bible." *Poetics of the Americas: race, Founding, and Textuality*. Ed. Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries. Louisiana State UP, 1997. 15-30.
- Kaplan, Carla, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. New York: Anchor, 2003.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. London: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Speisman, Barbara. "Voodoo as Symbol in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." Glassman and Seidel 86-93.
- Thompson, Mark Christian. "National Socialism and Blood-Sacrifice in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*." *African American Review* 38. 3 (2004) 395-415.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1983.
- Wall, Cheryl A, ed. *Hurston: Folklore, memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Lib. of Amer., 1995.
- , ed. *Hurston: Novels and Stories*. New York: Lib. of Amer., 1995.
- . "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Vision of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum* 23. 4 (1989) 661-680.
- Washington, Mary Helen. Foreword. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. by Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.
- Wilson, Anthony. "The Music of God, Man, and Beast: Spirituality and Modernity in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 35.2 (2003): 64-79