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"It Was Not Understood so it Became Divine": Voice and Silence as a Means of Expressing Narratival Autonomy, Establishing Creative Origins, and Qualifying the Sacred in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

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Abstract

The ontological project presented by African American spiritual and narrative phenomena has long been a subject of theoretical deliberation. Existing scholarship has been predominantly concerned with the role of narrative voice in providing African American bodies with visibility, upward mobility, and agency within the dominant and, ultimately, unsympathetic cultural framework. Certainly, this notion of voice is what bestows the African American narrative tradition with sacrality; it has allowed these peoples to cope with the unseen order of the universe, which is fundamentally chaotic and unpredictable. Furthermore, narrative voice, autonomy, and authority are the mediums through which the unseen order, as it is called, is categorized and interacted with. To be clear, existing scholarship has not explicitly theorized the encounters of these bodies with the sacred according to the narrative voice of the *latter*. Perhaps, this pedagogical problem is, in part, due to the ontological nature of the narrative voices ascribed to the sacred by African American narrative cosmology: these forces seemingly lack a voice, yet they are still granted divine status within this cosmological framework. This analysis seeks to understand this absence of narrative voice in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, and specifically as it appears during Moses' encounter with the God of Mount Horeb.

1. Introduction

The Western academy has long been concerned with the ontological project presented by African American spiritual and narrative phenomena. Much of the scholarship generated by these traditions illustrates — both explicitly and implicitly — that in African American religion, narrative construction functions as a means of self-creation through which individual and cultural origin stories are established and, ultimately, salvation from the dominant narrative of Western ontology is achieved. It is one's ability to narrate (to supply an origin story) that allows for this transformative process to occur. Thus, narratival autonomy is the phenomenon through which sacrality is bestowed upon those forces conceptualized and experienced within an African American cosmological framework. Certainly, the themes of narratival autonomy present within Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* exemplify this observation. However, the narrative voice of the God of Mount Horeb troubles this framework and its qualifiers of sacrality. Indeed, it is the absence of an origin story, rather, the exertion of narratival autonomy and authority, which presumes this absence, that affords the God of Mount Horeb an existential sacrality that challenges the reality of the novel's protagonist. Therefore, the God of the mountain in Hurston's novel can be identified archetypally as the indestructible life.

2. A Definition of Terms

The collective human consciousness inevitably entails interactions with and an attempt to understand the ineffable. William James suggested that "in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that [the life of religion] consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."[1] One significant mode through which humans cope with this unseen order, then, is by bestowing sacred archetypes upon it. The phenomenon of attempting to characterize those forces which are fundamentally beyond characterization can be observed in various religio-cultural frameworks, including those belonging to African American syncretic religious traditions. These forces are bestowed with the sacred archetype of what Carl Kerényi called the "indestructible life."[2]

Those forms of life which are indestructible are those that are perceived as lacking a so-called origin story: the narratival autonomy bestowed upon these forces that establish their creative origins. These origins, which narrative voice bestows, are not readily accessible to those forces which are destructible. Furthermore, two primary means through which the narrative voices of these unseen forces can be accessed are relationship and power (of which the former is a precondition). It appears, then, that the absence of creative origin — of an accessible narrative voice — is what qualifies these phenomena as indestructible. A force whose origin story is seemingly inaccessible implies to the accessor that it was not made (i.e. primordial) and therefore cannot be unmade. This presupposition is one that qualifies this unseen order as divine or sacred. The God of the mountain,[3] and specifically the way Hurston's Moses experiences this force, can be understood within this framework.

3. Abbreviated Literature Review

Keen interest in African American religious and narrative traditions on the part of the Western academy has produced an impressive body of scholarship concerned with how the black experience informs coinciding religious and cultural narratives. Scholars have viewed the African American narrative phenomenon as a creative hermeneutic through which the individual conceptualizes and negotiates the cosmos and the unseen forces within it, the essence of which is fundamentally chaotic. This collection of literature does not, however, explicate the function of narrative voice as the mechanism through which the creative origins of unseen forces are established and sacrality is bestowed thereunto. There is, admittedly, still much to be studied on this front.

In "'The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Deborah Clarke is concerned with the function of voice in the African American narrative tradition. She conceptualizes this discussion through Janie, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Clarke argues that, for Hurston, "the construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see, a voice that celebrates the visual presence of black bodies;" in other words, the trope of voice itself is only empowering insofar as it allows an individual to be seen.[4]

The author reasons that it is this narratival strategy of seeing, rather than the telling *of*, one's story that informs how the narrator's identity is created and asserted in Hurston's work. Furthermore, this "seeing" determines how other bodies will *know*, or interact with and interpret, the identity being established by the narrator according to a greater cultural framework. In other words, a voice that is "seen" allows an individual to establish narrative authority, and, subsequently, autonomy over their body and identity both apart from and as a result of the cultural experience of blackness.[5]

Gary Storhoff enters a conversation with Clarke and other scholars in "'The Only Voice is Your Own': Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*." Much like how Clarke investigates Hurston's character Janie, Storhoff uses Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* to perform a literary analysis of how the author herself enlists the mechanism of voice. He argues that "[Naylor's] ambitious narrative project is, in essence, a declaration of independence — an acknowledgment of the academic canon's value, but also an assertion of her racial and gender difference."[6] Further, "Without repudiation of texts that she obviously loves, she can tell *her* story, but never at the expense of her own unique narrative voice."[7]

Similarly to Clarke, Storhoff contributes to the notion that voice is the primary mechanism through which African American bodies assert, or, as Storhoff puts it, "declare," their autonomy, thus allowing them to situate themselves within the superficially dominant cultural narrative. Clarke illustrates how, for Janie, voice was not the primary mechanism through which she, as an African American woman existing in a specific cultural and historical context, could "tell her story." Establishing her narrative voice would allow her to be seen — a goal that illustrates Storhoff's notion of narrative authority.[8] Similarly, Gloria Naylor, as an African American woman and author, was concerned

with the acquisition and establishment of a discursive narratival authority (i.e. voice) that would allow her, as a writer, to be seen — to be rendered visible within the dominant cultural narrative.

Through this observation, Storhoff elucidates another notion established by existing scholarship concerning the black narrative tradition: a sense of obligation among African Americans, and especially African American writers, to tell their story. Gloria Naylor, Hurston's Janie, Hurston herself, and other African Americans have, historically, had to confront a lack of aesthetic and literary representation and, consequently, subvert this narratival insufficiency. The message implied by these popular narratives was: "To have your story told, *you* must tell it yourself." Perhaps this sense of obligation experienced historically by African Americans is essential to understanding why the narratival absence of the God of Mount Horeb is so existentially troubling for Hurston's Moses. The God of the mountain feels no sense of obligation to communicate its creative origins to anyone, including Moses, who, despite being empowered by his own narrative voice, still experiences a sense of obligation to self-create.

In "African Signs and Spirit Writing," Harryette Mullen identifies and troubles the categories of "speakerly texts" and "writerly texts" as they emerge within the African American narrative tradition. Mullen argues that "any theory of African-American literature that privileges a speech-based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition."[9] Mullen's argument is diametrically opposed to preceding scholars: she rejects frameworks that privilege voice, claiming that to favor "speech-based poetics" would be to commit a theoretical disservice to the African American narrative tradition. Mullen's argument is important to consider when performing an interpretive analysis on those texts that appear superficially to be writerly, such as *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Foremost, it fails to acknowledge that these writerly texts are indeed speakerly. Fictional and folkloric corpuses such as Zora Neale Hurston's exist within a unique cosmological framework wherein narrative construction, in all its modes of presentation, is the primary (and often only) discursive medium through which humanity negotiates the irrational grounds of existence. Furthermore, this framework bestows those individuals or forces possessing narratival authority with creative powers that qualify a relationship with, or even status of divinity.

Zora Neale Hurston contextualizes this observation in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, where she reflects on bearing witness to the narratival contest between Big Sweet and an unnamed opponent, which she refers to as "playing the dozens."[10] She explains that "playing the dozens" requires the narrator initiating the contest to be "sufficiently armed — enough to stand off a panzer division — and know what to do with [their] weapons after [they] get 'em" and that "if [the narrator has] no faith in [their] personal courage and confidence in [their] arsenal, don't try it."[11]

Through Hurston's retelling of this encounter, it becomes evident that to participate in narrative creation — thus, to establish narrative voice and authority — requires some measure of cultivated discursive skill and confidence on the part of the narrator. Thus, the narrator that is self-assertive, that is to say, possessing a thoroughly cultivated narrative "arsenal," positions themselves within the realms of creative power, autonomy, and authority that exist within the African American cosmological framework.

This excerpt relates to the preceding discussion of Harryette Mullen's "African Signs and Spirit Writing" in that it troubles the proposed categories of speakerly texts and writerly texts, so, too, her theoretical concern for the exclusion of the latter from the study of African American cultural narratives. Rather than attempting to categorize and validate the textual forms through which these narratives manifest, perhaps it is more helpful to acknowledge that both speakerly texts such as Hurston's folkloric corpus and writerly texts like *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, are viable categories within the African American narrative tradition. Each category requires the speaker to self-assert, to establish a confident narrative voice, and to cultivate a discursive arsenal. Furthermore, each of Mullen's textual categories is speakerly; both written and oral African American cultural narratives are part of the living, breathing, indestructible divine force that is the African American narrative tradition.

In "Becoming American Through Ethnographic Writing: Zora Neale Hurston and the Performance of Ethnography," Eve E. Dunbar illustrates the competitive relationship between the categories of "black modernity" and "black folk" by implementing the debate between Zora Neale Hurston and one of her theoretical rivals, Richard Wright. The author uses this discourse to emphasize the notion of "contestation,"[12] a term that this analysis has encountered in works such as *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Dunbar claims that the role of contestation was paramount to Hurston's own cultural production.[13] Dunbar further suggests that Hurston's concern with black folk culture resulted in her frequent engagement in discursive battles in and over her work. She writes that "Contestation… fuels [Hurston's] writing in such a way as to allow the competing concerns of race, gender, and nationalism that run through her works to coexist without ever becoming fully cohesive."[14]

This contention is an example of Clarke and Storhoff's notion of narrative construction as a discursive tool through which one's identity and experiences can be asserted: because Hurston framed her works according to her own experiences with theoretical and ontological contestation, she demonstrated Storhoff's notion of narrative authority. To use Clarke's language, she established a voice through which she could assert her aforementioned authority and

offer her own critiques of race, gender, and other social concerns. Because Eve E. Dunbar is concerned specifically with Hurston's role as an ethnographer, her work is distinct from those produced by Clarke, Storhoff, or Mullen. Furthermore, Dunbar is not explicitly concerned with the implications that Hurston's implementation of narrative authority as a means of cultural production might have for the study of African American religious and narratival traditions.

Dunbar's investigation of Hurston's experience with theoretical contestation in "Becoming American Through Ethnographic Writing" aids in the contextualization of the theoretical data (i.e. narratives) being dealt with in the present analysis. Although this contextualization occurs, perhaps, implicitly, it demonstrates that those works within Hurston's novelic corpus cannot be understood and interpreted according to the language of objectivity. More specifically, Dunbar's work illustrates how Hurston's own discursive struggle to find her voice, to establish her own theoretical, thus narratival, authority directly influenced her literary works. Therefore, the works contained with Zora Neale Hurston's novelic corpus, including *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, can be conceptualized as experiential; although these narrative works are fictional rather than biographical, like Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* or *Barracoon*, they are undoubtedly products of her experience as an African American woman, folklorist, ethnographer, author, and scholar. Unarguably, then, they must be understood as such; they must be experienced subjectively, as Hurston experienced them, according to her discursive quest to find her voice and self-create. These observations parallel those made by Gary Storhoff in reflecting on the life of Gloria Naylor, the black woman and author who contextualized the historic sense of obligation that African Americans experience to tell their stories.[15] Both she and Hurston were faced with theoretical, thus narratival and existential, contestation. Both authors felt inclined to use these discursive experiences to produce literary works that would allow others to participate in their experiences of blackness.

Despite their differences, the works of Clarke, Storhoff, Dunbar, and others are helpful in elucidating those facets of African American religious and narrative traditions that have been given theoretical attention, as well those facts that have not. A question that is raised upon investigating the works of these scholars concerns how these categories of voice, narrative authority, and self-creation are (and can be interpreted as) significant to the way in which we, as scholars, understand black religion.

4. Methodological Rationale

Phenomenology is, perhaps, the most appropriate methodological choice for performing an analysis that seeks to understand the narratival autonomy — and absence thereof — present in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (so, too, in African American religion) as a set of spiritual and archetypal phenomena. The process of narrative creation is the means through which an individual existing in an African American cultural framework might cope with the irrational grounds of the cosmos by allowing an individual to conceptualize, experience, and establish a tangible relationship with the divine. Thus, narrative creation is a phenomenon capable of both bestowing sacrality thereunto its acquisition and resulting self-creative properties, as well as quantifying the autonomous "self" established within the narrative as sacred in its own right. Furthermore, narratival autonomy, so, too, the sacrality it bestows, are categories not limited to human beings; the unseen order[16] conceived by the African American cosmological framework during encounters like Moses' with the God of the mountain participate independently and mysteriously in the process of narrative creation. Therefore, the theoretical lens that would best accommodate an analysis seeking to interpret the act of individual narrative construction as reflective of the collective African American religious experience would be that which is ascribed to phenomenology.

Although the research methods attributed to a phenomenological scope may prove more apt to perform the analysis in question, the efficacy of literary theory should, too, be considered. An analysis concerned with how narrative construction in African American religion is capable of ascribing sacrality and identity and, especially, how this process is demonstrated in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, will ultimately employ some subset of literary theory. This theoretical lens aids in identifying the implications of the initial inclination experienced by African American peoples to establish narrative authority. Furthermore, this theoretical lens could aid in interpreting the narratival voice of the God of Mount Horeb, as well as Moses' relationship to this force, as literary thematic archetypes. Bearing the research methods and concerns of literary theory in mind for the duration of this analysis will account for those instances when the data in question doesn't easily fit into a phenomenological mold.

The data, then, that this analysis is concerned with are those instances of narratival autonomy being established by the God of the mountain or group present within Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. A thorough analysis that interprets the archetypal significance of this divine force's narrative voice and Moses' existential

relationship to it will support the claim that narratival autonomy is capable of bestowing any one individual or force with sacred power, which illustrates that the narrative process is significant within an African American cosmological framework.

Neither a phenomenological nor literary theoretical lens are without their faults. For instance, a weak analysis might enlist a phenomenological scope in such a way that all data being handled are completely reduced to spiritual phenomena. The same observation could be made regarding a weak literary analysis. It is worth noting, then, especially considering the sources being dealt with in this analysis, that either of the methods in question has the potential to become reductionist if not enlisted responsibly. That is why, perhaps, implementing literary theory as a backdrop for a phenomenological interpretive analysis would prove more productive than an analysis that utilizes only one or the other of these theoretical lenses. Another concern that the use of these methodologies raises is that neither of them can really account for the experiential, participatory aspect of narrative construction in the same way that ethnographic research could, an understanding of which is crucial to inform a discussion about African American religion and culture. Therefore, the methodologies in question must be carefully implemented with this observation in mind.

An example of an analysis that not only utilizes a phenomenological lens, but is also concerned with a form of narrative construction — more specifically, that is, with Afro-Protestant conversion narratives — is Clarence E. Hardy's *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture.* In his work, Hardy explains the ecstatic mass-conversion experience of Afro-Protestantism as a set of phenomena according to a synthesization of conversion narratives present in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Hardy's analysis is a helpful phenomenological template because it performs its mission well without sacrificing the literary integrity and autonomy of the conversion narrative in Baldwin's work. Similarly, the literary analysis of *Parable of the Sower* performed by Monica A. Coleman in *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, although grounded in postmodern womanist theology, serves as an example of how literary theory might be implemented in conjunction with other methodological frameworks to produce a responsible and informed interpretive analysis. Based on these examples, it would make sense, then, to establish a phenomenological theoretical lens that operates in conjunction with the scope of literary theory in order to produce a comprehensive analysis of Hurston's subversion of narratival autonomy in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

5. Analysis

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston reimagines the biblical character of Moses as a powerful spiritual conjurer, which is a role of religious authority within African-derived cosmological systems. The unique cosmological framework Hurston presents within this novel is contextualized by how she describes the existential and spiritual conditions of the enslaved Hebrew people: "So [the Hebrews] had no comfort left but to beat their breasts to crush the agony inside. Israel had learned to weep."[17] Perhaps Hurston's "comfort" refers to the tangible presence of a divine order — better, still, an accessible means through which to cope with this order — in the midst of the existential crisis of enslavement.

More explicitly, the existing Hebrew cosmological experience had been opposed and disrupted by the sudden and violent experience of enslavement. It is arguable, then, that this crisis was experienced by the Israelites as a paralyzing confrontation of spiritual abandonment; in essence, the gods of Israel had died, and in mourning of this great spiritual and existential loss, the despondent nation of Israel could only weep. These are the existential conditions from which the author embarks on the hermeneutical project of reimagining the cosmological framework inhabited by a people in spiritual mourning, their oppressors and weaponized gods, and the creative and transformative modes through which these actors attempt to negotiate the unseen order of the universe. All of these conditions preface what is, for the purposes of this analysis, the author's narratival crescendo: the hierophany ("the manifestation of the sacred"[18]) that Hurston's Moses experiences upon his initial encounter with the God of Mount Horeb, the great "I AM."[19]

In a conversation between Amram, Moses' father, and Caleb, Amram observes that "Horus may be all… good things… to the Egyptians… but that sun-god is just something to fry our [the Hebrew peoples'] backs."[20] This statement realizes the functionality of the gods of Egypt for both the Egyptians and the Israelites as well as the relationships of these parties thereunto. These gods, for their Egyptian makers, are symbolic of the power of their nation; they are the forces that ensure the prosperity of an Egyptian imperial (thus, narratival) ideology, so, too, the Egyptian bodies it favors. Contrastly for Amram, whose voice echoes those of his Hebrew brethren, and, eventually, for Moses, these gods are the discursive weapons enlisted, or better, still, commanded, to "burn their backs," to justify Hebrew enslavement as, essentially, "the will of the gods."

The preceding observations conceive of two distinct, yet, married existential narratives present within the novel: the first, insofar as its aesthetic superficiality, is that of a menacing Egyptian imperial agenda and, subsequently, the privileged bodies that inhabit it; the second, then, is not simply the woe of those existentially troubled Hebrew bodies, and is, rather, better understood as the collective ontological project these bodies embark on in order to negotiate the existential terms ascribed to them by the experience of enslavement. The former narrative claims an unsympathetic and irrefutable origin story that seeks to, on a cosmological level, negate those origins that are non-Egyptian; the latter, then, in the midst of their existential grief, has acknowledged that the former must be undone subversively, at worst, for the sake of preserving certain "Hebrewisms," and at best, to establish (or, perhaps, re-establish) their own creative origins.

The narrative case of the former is, in part, because of a greater cosmological sense of obligation on the part of the Israelites to "tell their story"[21] — to establish narratival autonomy in order to, at last, propose creative origins — whilst simultaneously existing ontologically within and warring ontologically against the story of their oppressors, which refuse to, and, ultimately, cannot sympathize with the experience of Hebrew enslavement.

One might parallel the seemingly instinctual need of enslaved Hebrews to self-assert narratival responsibility to a similar compulsion expressed by African Americans both during and after the abolishment of slavery in the United States. One such example of this parallel appears in Gary Storhoff's revisitation of an interview with Gloria Naylor, an African American woman and author, published in 1991. When asked her reasons for pursuing a literary career Naylor states:

> "I wrote because I had no choice, but that was a long road from gathering the authority within myself to believe that I could actually be a writer. The writers I had been taught to love were either male or white. And who was I to argue that Ellison, Austen, Dickens… [and others] … weren't masters? They were and are. But inside there was still the faintest whisper: Was there no one telling *my* story? And since there appeared there was not, how could I presume to?"[22]

Various connections can be made between Naylor's answer and the compulsory need to narrate experienced by but certainly not limited to the Israelites in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

Firstly, Naylor identifies an existing body of "male and white" narratival authorities which she contextualizes with examples such as Ellison, Austen, and Dickens.[23] Furthermore, she recognizes that these authors were literary "masters," while concurrently implying that to convey the cultural and historical experiences of marginalized persons such as Naylor was not a narratival priority within these texts and that these masters could not and would not sympathize with her experience as an African American woman and author. Having acknowledged the apathy of this literary framework, Naylor then asks herself who would, then, "tell [*her*] story" if not these narratival authorities.[24] In this moment, she recognizes and confesses her compulsion to assume narratival responsibility or, as she describes it, "the authority within [herself]."[25] The sense of obligation experienced by enslaved Hebrews in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is, indeed, paralleled by Gloria Naylor's statement; the sequence of any one marginalized body first consciously recognizing the apathy of the dominant narrative within which they inhabit, and secondly the instinctual responsibility experienced upon the identification of former to establish their own distinct voice, can be observed within both contexts.

Here, then, enters Moses: a dejected former prince of Egypt, who, after his exile, embarks on a quest to discover his own creative origins, which are understood to endure in ironic harmony with the will of the indestructible[26] force he encounters on Mount Horeb. Before an analysis of this protagonist's search for existential meaning can be performed, a distinction must be made between Zora Neale Hurston's Moses and the Moses of the biblical canon. Once placed within the narrative framework shared by both the original scripture and Hurston's reinterpretation of it (that of an oppressive Egyptian state and an oppressed Hebrew peoples' attempts to survive and subvert it), it becomes clear that Hurston's Moses poses an ontological problem. More explicitly, his character troubles the narrative framework he inhabits, thus he cannot be categorized according to the language of these frameworks.

In the original scripture, Moses' narratival intersectionality, the spiritual and identity crises he experiences upon having to confront the former, and his quest to re-discover and establish his own narrative voice are aesthetically understated. Contrastly, these aspects of Hurston's protagonist narratival autonomy are thematically emphasized, thus, forming the theoretical backbone of the novel. Furthermore, the miraculous powers through which Moses was able to lead the Hebrews to salvation were seemingly granted to him according to a shallow, incentive-based relationship with the divine that promised salvation in exchange for one-sided loyalty and obedience.

Indeed, the biblically canonic Moses had the ability to converse with God, and could even request his aid in performing miracles, but this Moses could not command or conjure the powers of his God. Hurston's reimagination

of this character and his relationship to the divine starkly opposes his biblical counterpart. The author alludes to rendering her Moses in ontological opposition to the biblical canon in the novel's introduction:

> "All across Africa, America, and the West Indies, there are tales of the powers of Moses and great worship of him and his powers. But [this fascination with Moses] does not flow from the Ten Commandments. It is his rod of power, the terror he showed he showed before all Israel and to Pharaoh, and THAT MIGHTY HAND."[27]

This observation, as well as those that precede it, illustrate the divergence of Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* from the original biblical narrative; for the author, the aspect of Moses which ultimately allowed him to liberate the Israelites was *not* his faith in or obedience to God, but "his rod of power."[28] To identify the problem that Hurston's Moses poses ontologically promotes an understanding of why the author's reimagination of his quest for narrative autonomy should be revered as a significant contribution to the African American narrative tradition.

Certainly, because it is his narrative within which Moses encounters the "God of the mountain," and because Moses, himself presents an ontological problem, this entity, its narrative voice, and the sacred indestructibility thereof, are all, themselves, ontological problems. Our protagonist realizes this dilemma upon encountering this God:

> "But early in the afternoon he saw his first mountain. It made him feel as if he had been lacking in something vital to life all along. He saw the great mountain at a distance… and was dumbstruck with awe. To him it had its being in grandeur, so it was right and proper to draw itself apart from the surrounding country and hide its mysteries in its heart. It was near; it was far. It called. It forbade. It was all things to his inner consciousness. He must believe in gods again, for here was the tomb of a god a thousand times greater than the pyramids."[29]

In this excerpt, Moses beholds the mountain as a force that transcends not only the ontological categories of the sacred established by the dominant (Egyptian) narrative, but most importantly, how his own narrative understands these categories. Consequently, the protagonist experiences the mountain as both ontologically and cosmologically autonomous; the mountain was set "apart from the surrounding country,"[30] and seemed to have a presence all its own. Further, all of its "mysteries [were] in its heart,"[31] which, for Moses, renders its origin story inaccessible.

The mountain's ontologically stupefying characteristics are what ultimately qualify its sacrality within the narrative: the autonomous nature of this entity rejects the language of the novel's pre-established ontological frameworks. More importantly, it is not through narrative autonomy or voice that the mountain orients itself within the dominant narrative. The God of the mountain does not "speak," does not (need to) declare its creative origins to any other being, including Moses and, according the protagonist experiences this as a narrative choice that not only subverts, but negates his own compulsion to establish narratival autonomy, authority, identity and an origin story.

Certainly, it is this absence of origin, this supposedly deliberate choice not to "speak," that ultimately empowers the mountain and renders it narratively visible, which rejects theories proposed by Deborah Clarke, Gary Storhoff, and Eve E. Dunbar, who understood narrative voice and autonomy as the means through which African Americans could establish and celebrate their "visual presence."[32] Furthermore, the God of Mount Horeb's silence subverts the narrative compulsion expressed by African American writers such as Gloria Naylor and even Zora Neale Hurston in her autobiography. Undoubtedly, Moses' narrative quest reflects both the arguments made by Clarke and others concerning the African American narrative tradition, as well as how these arguments were lived by authors such as Hurston and Naylor. More specifically, Moses, in the midst of an existential crises, felt a compulsory need to discover his creative origins. In order to satisfy this desire, he resigned himself to establish narrative autonomy, authority, and ultimately enter a narrative contest[33] with the dominant ontological framework.

However, this quest is certainly not the precipice of the novel, because the protagonist's initial encounter with the God of the mountain wholly defies his efforts. Furthermore, it does not share the protagonist's existential obligations. Thus, all of Moses narratival cultivation[34] and discursive training fall short in the face of this metamorphic encounter: "He must believe in gods, again, for here was the tomb of a god a thousand times greater than the pyramids."[35] The protagonist realizes that his narratival authority cannot compete with this god in a battle of narrative wits, and that even the pyramids, thus the Egyptian empire and its origin story would succumb to its magnitude in a narrative contest: "No, it was no negative and vain thing like a pyramid, whose builders were puny pygmies about the toes of the mountain. This was not a mere pile of stone."[36] In this moment, Moses comes to understand the God of the mountain as the indestructible life.[37] Lacking in accessible origin and in defiance of the narrative's established ontological order, Moses concludes that this force was not made in the same way that the Egyptian gods have been made, thus, it cannot be unmade, a form of narratival authority with which the Pharaoh, his gods, and even Moses cannot compete.

Furthermore, this ineffable force does not belong to a maker, and as such, does not prioritize any one specific origin story and the bodies it might validate. Indeed, this "great I AM"[38] of Mount Horeb is its own maker; it is primordial; it is indestructible.

6. Conclusion

To be clear, African American religious and narrative phenomena — and the unseen order they conceive — are understood theoretically to not only disrupt but reject the dominant ontological framework within which they occur. These "Africanisms" are not simply those parts of Africa and its gods that survived the violence of Atlanticization, American and European enslavement, and the collective existential crisis of blackness made manifest by the veneer of Western Christianity and the ontological or cosmological frameworks ascribe thereunto. Instead, these traditions should be understood foremost as the modes by which African Americans have, historically, coped with the chaotic cosmological order conceived by those oppressive and ontologically challenging experiences of blackness.

Furthermore, the ability to construct narrative allowed black bodies to render themselves visible within the dominant narrative of Atlanticization both by deliberately subverting whilst existing harmoniously within it. This analysis has revealed that the compulsion experienced by African Americans to tell their story is a symptom of inhabiting a framework that has, consistently, failed them in that regard. This revelation, when married to Moses' relationship to the God of Mount Horeb in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, is extremely telling of conceptions of the divine and its qualifiers in African American cosmological systems.

Hurston's God, both rejects and negates the dominant framework that threatens the narratival autonomy of marginalized bodies by diametrically opposing the notion that voice is the primary mechanism through which an entity makes itself visible. Perhaps, then, the silent God of African American religious and narrative traditions is reflective of a collective desire among these marginalized bodies to be able to exist within a narrative that favors their voice and that doesn't require them to justify their existential value.

7. Endnotes

1 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: University Books, Inc., 1963), 53.

2 Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), xxvii.

3 Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 105.

4 Deborah Clarke, "'The porch couldn't talk for looking': Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American Review* 35, no. 4 (Winter, 2001): 599-600.

5 Gary Storhoff, "'The Only Voice is Your Own': Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*," *African American Review* 29, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 35.

6 Storhoff, "'The Only Voice is Your Own,'" 35.

7 Storhoff, 35.

8 Storhoff, 35.

9 Mullen, "African Signs and Spirit Writing," *Callaloo* 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1996): 670-671.

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