

From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a text richly endowed with meaning and purpose which uses poetic language and folkloric imagery to convey its messages. One recurrent symbol throughout the first half of the novel is that of the mule. Hurston uses the image of the mule to comment on the disparity between speech and silence in the life of Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods. One of Hurston's projects in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is to examine the effects of silence and the empowerment that arises in the act of breaking free from that silence. She is concerned with the personal growth that comes from giving voice to one's ideas and emotions. While there are numerous examples of silencing in the text, this study will treat those which are associated with mule imagery, focusing on four main sites of the mule in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Through tracing Janie's negotiation of these sites, we may better understand her movement from a woman silenced by her community, her grandmother, and her first two husbands to a character who is able to exercise her strong, womanly voice by the end of the text. Thus, Janie's story of personal growth may be charted as one that travels from mules to muliebrity.

Muliebrity, as defined by the *OED*, is "the state or condition of being a woman" or possessing full womanly powers. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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illustrates Janie's growth into womanhood as it reveals the ways in which this growth is linked to her ability to express her ideas and emotions to those around her. Throughout the first half of the novel, Janie's voice often goes unheard or is stifled before it has a chance to reach others. The image of the mule is frequently linked to these acts of silencing, while the absence of the mule indicates the potential for speech and communication in Janie's life.

Before attempting a close reading of the four mule sites in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we must consider Hurston's sources for her mule imagery. The mule functions as a central symbol in the folklore collection *Mules and Men* as well as in "The Bone of Contention," the short story upon which her play *Mule Bone* is based. These texts were written before *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and they provide interesting insights about the novel's mule imagery. Hurston's choice of this animal is significant considering its constitution and connotations. The mule is an animal of mixed parentage (donkey and horse), usually the offspring of a jackass and a mare. Mules are frequently sterile and are employed as beasts of burden to labor for their masters. However, mules are stereotypically portrayed not as docile but rather as stubborn and unpredictable animals.

This description of mules in general reveals some striking parallels to the situation of African-Americans in the aftermath of slavery and to Janie Crawford's life in particular. Like a mule, Janie is the product of mixed parentage. Her mother, Leafy, was raped by a school teacher (18). Janie is the offspring of this union, continuing a legacy of rape which can be traced to Leafy's birth as the result of Nanny's rape by her white master during the last days of the slave era (16-18). Both the school teacher and the slave owner might be likened to the jackass in the mule lineage, while the black women are like mares whose equine heritage is corrupted by the rapes. The sexual sterility of mules may represent a form of silencing, as we see that Janie's ability and desire to communicate is frequently linked to sexual satisfaction while her silence is an indication that her sexual desires are missing or thwarted.

The mule's function as a beast of burden plays itself out as a symbol for slavery—institutionalized or otherwise. Nanny has firsthand experience of slavery with its associated economic and emotional bondage. She has been forced to bear the weight of the labor inflicted by her slave owner as well as forced to labor to bear the fruits of his rape of her. Her life experiences have convinced Nanny that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world" (14). However, the analogy between the situation of the enslaved black and the mule is much more complex and sophisticated than a simple one-to-one

correspondence. The mule image functions on multiple levels in Hurston's text, allowing her to comment on numerous types of relationships based on an unequal distribution of power. As Klaus Benesch has written:

the identification of "mules and men" is no longer the main impetus for the tale tellers in an all-black community like Eatonville. Yet, by using such stories in *Their Eyes*, Hurston not only signifies on a collective past [slavery] but also, in alluding to Nanny's earlier remark that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world," signifies on the role of black women as well as on the male-female relationships. (633)

Thus, Nanny's remark illuminates the types of relationships that Janie experiences in her marriages to Logan Killicks and to Jody Starks. The mule/master dichotomy is played out on many levels in these marriages in ways which will become evident in my discussion of the four textual sites of the mule in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

We need to consider, in addition to its role as a beast of burden in a relationship based on an unequal distribution of power, the mule's stereotypical stubbornness and unpredictability. Because of these characteristics, the mule functions as a site of potential resistance to the status quo. Mary Katherine Wainwright has noted that

[a]t the same time she celebrates the life of the folk in *Mules and Men*, Hurston illustrates black women's vigorous defiance of conventional gender expectations and male authority. Using her folkloric sensibility to subvert the dominant culture's ideology regarding African-Americans, she adds a politics of gender to her politics of race by employing a *female* folk teller to undermine negative assumptions about black women held by both black and white cultures. (64)

Thus, the text of *Mules and Men* reveals that agency and voice are, in the end, controlled by the female narrative which frames the individual folktales. This female narrative relies on the powers of verbal transformation and trickery which are likewise employed by the mules in the tales "Why They Always Use Rawhide on a Mule" and "The Talking Mule."

In these African-American folklore stories collected by Hurston, the mule is a trickster who uses his wits and obstinacy to outsmart those who try to control him. Because *Mules and Men* teaches us that the mule is not only a beast of burden but also a subversive figure, we can see that mule imagery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is used not only to silence Janie and keep her in her

place (or what Nanny, Logan, and Jody consider to be her place); it also has the potential to function as a key to her growth and freedom from silence. When Janie practices the stubborn and unpredictable ways of the trickster-mule in her own life, she begins a movement toward full womanhood, or muliebrity.

Mules as tricksters figure prominently in two folktales in Hurston's collection *Mules and Men*. Significantly, the ability of the mule to outwit those who want to use him for forced labor in these stories is linked to his ability to speak. The mules in these tales are far from silent, docile work animals. In the tale "Why They Always Use Rawhide on a Mule," we hear the story of an ox who feigns sickness to avoid work. The mule that is then forced to make up for the ox's absence tells Ole Massa that the ox is "playin' off sick" (118), and Massa decides to have the ox butchered. Upon hearing what the man has planned, the ox tells the mule to tell Massa that he is well and can return to work. The ox is nevertheless led off to slaughter, and he says to the mule, "If you hadn't of told Massa on me, Ah wouldn't be goin' where Ah am. They're gointer kill me, but Ah'll always be war on your back" (118). In this tale, the mule is able to gain the upper hand on the ox because of his ability to speak. However, despite the fact that the mule may have gotten revenge on the lazy ox, he is still disempowered in his relationship to Ole Massa. We do not learn whether Massa purchases another ox to lighten the load on the mule, but we know from the title that the ox comes back to haunt the mule many times through the use of rawhide whips.

Perhaps this story can be read as a cautionary tale about learning when it is appropriate to speak and how to use speech to one's own advantage. The mule is rather shortsighted in revealing the ox's dishonesty to Ole Massa. Instead of attempting to use his verbal powers to trick the ox himself, the mule appeals to a higher power and the end result is that the mule remains disempowered and perhaps worse off than he originally was (because when the ox was only playing at being sick, he might potentially still recover to help the mule with the work). As Beulah S. Hemmingway has noted, "[w]hile this tale clearly is demonstrative of the trickster who is tricked, conversely it reveals the importance or self-representation in an environment controlled by others" (41). Hurston, therefore, uses this tale to talk about the effects of speech and its deployment in master/slave relationships.

Another of the tales in *Mules and Men*, "The Talking Mule," provides a much less ambiguous message about speech and silence. In this tale we see what happens when a mule named Bill uses his verbal powers to outwit his owner. As the story begins, the master's son is sent to fetch the mule to begin the day's work. The mule refuses to put his head in the bridle, and he

complains to the boy that he "[d]on't hardly get no night rest befo' it's 'Come round, Bill!'" (172). The boy runs home to tell his father that the mule is talking. The father thinks his son is lying, so he sets out with his dog trailing behind to fetch the mule. When he calls for Bill, the mule responds, "Every mornin' it's come round Bill!" (172). The man returns to tell his wife that "[d]at mule *is* talkin'," and his dog speaks to back him up (172-73). The man gets so "skeered" that he takes off for the woods, and "[h]e nearly run hissself ruh death" (173). When he finally stops to take a breath, his dog speaks to him a second time, which sets the man in motion again. The tale concludes with the information: "Dat man is runnin' yet" (173).

We are left to assume that the mule finally obtains his desired (and presumably, deserved) rest. The lesson of this tale in regard to speech seems to be that the proper application of verbal surprises can achieve great results. The "talking mule" is victorious, and the master who made him work so hard has been run off his own land. When Janie breaks her silence in surprising ways—such as her invective against Jody after he purchases Matt Bonner's mule—she, too, uses speech to obtain the result she desires.

These two tales from *Mules and Men* exemplify Hurston's definition of folklore as "...the arts of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art, and they make it out of whatever they have at hand" ("Folklore and Music" 184). Hurston's short story "The Bone of Contention" is likewise made out of the ready-at-hand folklore image of the mule. This text forms the basis for *Mule Bone*, the play Hurston wrote with Langston Hughes, as well as for the episode of Matt Bonner's yellow mule recounted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. "The Bone of Contention" centers around the image of Brazzle's yellow mule and the dispute that arises when one of the bones of his carcass is used by one man to strike another. The story opens as follows:

Eatonville, Florida is a colored town and has its colored interests. It has not now, nor ever has had anything to rank Brazzle's yellow mule. His Yaller Highness was always mentioned before the weather, the misery of the back or leg, or the hard times. (27)

Similar to Matt Bonner's yellow mule in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Brazzle's mule functions as the larger-than-life subject of tales as well as a symbol for the circulation of discourse in the town. Both mules are known for their meanness and both are the topic of store porch gossip both before and after their deaths. However, while Matt Bonner's mule is noted for the exploits that occurred during his life, Brazzle's mule is celebrated because of what happened to his dead body. When one of the mule's bones is used by Jim

Weston to hit Dave Carter, the town gathers at a trial to determine whether a mule bone can be considered a weapon.

The trial itself provides an interesting place to study speech and silence as many of the townspeople shout to be heard and the judge tries to quiet them. For example, Hurston writes, "Mrs. Lewis had to be restrained. She gave voice and hard, bone-breaking words flew back and forth across the aisle" (35). The judge yells, "You moufy wimmen! Shet up. Aint Ah done said cote was set? . . . Make them wimmen dry up or put 'em outa heah" (35), and the marshal who then tries to restore order is silenced by two arguing women who eventually quiet themselves. The trial commences, and it is eventually determined that a mule bone is, in fact, a weapon because "Everybody knows dat de further back on a mule you goes, de mo' dangerous he gits. Now if de jawbone is as dangerous as it says heah [in Judges 15: 16], in de Bible, by de time you gits clear back tuh his hocks hes rank pizen" (38).

Hurston's story, despite its humor, reveals an important message about the link between a mule and the liberty to speak. Brazzle's mule is not only the primary subject of the store porch lying sessions, he is also a mythic symbol around which the freedom to speak and the constraints of silence circulate. Hurston emphasizes this when she writes: "the mule remained with them in song and story as a simile, as a metaphor to point a moral or adorn a tale" (28). The mule's power to move the town to speech and action outlives the mule himself. Joe Clark notes that "'dat ol' mule been dead three years an' still kickin'! An he done kicked more'n one person outa whack today'" (39).

In a fashion similar to the community-centered image of Brazzle's yellow mule in "The Bone of Contention," the first site of mule imagery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is communal in nature. Our first vision of Eatonville rises out of the evening dusk:

It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment. (1-2)

This passage is an important introduction to the connection between mules and silence in Hurston's text. We see the community gathered to talk, to listen, to share now that evening has arrived. Hurston sharply contrasts this state with the lack of potential for communication during the day when the men and women are inhabited by "[m]ules and other brutes" as their senses

close off, leaving them "tongueless, earless, [and] eyeless." The mule is literally embodied in the townspeople under the strictures of their daytime working conditions. When evening arrives, these men and women are transformed from "mules," "brutes," and "conveniences" into humans who relish the powers of communication. Their skins, once occupied by "mules," now feel "powerful and human."

This power further transforms the men and women into "lords," a role reversal possible only now that "the bossman [is] gone." Hurston links this change in status to breaking free from silence: "They became lords of sounds and lesser things." The transformation from tongueless brutes to lords of sounds is revealed in the grandiose speech in which "They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment." Hurston's use of "nations" implies legacies, heritage, and universal experiences passed down via stories. It also indicates speaking for and of many individuals. This imagery again recalls the communal focus of the transformation from silence to speech and from mules to men in this passage. In her writing here and elsewhere, "blacks ceased to be 'tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences' whose labor whites exploited; they ceased to be mules and were men and women" (Wall 373).

However, this image of transformation is not completely positive. The townspeople "sat in judgment" over those like Janie who do not conform to their social expectations. The women judge Janie for going off with a younger man, and the men objectify her because they judge her physically appealing. These actions reveal ways in which the community works to silence Janie. However, Janie's voice perseveres and makes itself heard through the recounting of her story to Pheoby.¹

The next instance of mule imagery in the novel occurs in the context of Janie's first steps towards womanhood and her grandmother's response toward this burgeoning sexuality. After she sees Janie kissing Johnny Taylor, Nanny feels compelled to warn her about the role she will be expected to play in the world of adult male-female relationships. Nanny's views on this subject are most certainly colored by her own life experiences as she tells Janie,

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick

¹ Michael Awkward's essay, "The Inaudible Voice of It All": Silence, Voice and Action in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, offers an enlightening discussion of the issue of speech and agency in light of the idea that Janie's story is told only to Pheoby.

it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tore it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fur it tuh be different wid you. (14)

Nanny's commentary on the status of black-white and male-female relationships is intended to prepare Janie for what Nanny sees as the unavoidable realities of life. She has seen how the social hierarchy works to pass "de load" from white men to black males to black "womenfolks." She qualifies her ideas by using the phrases "as fur as Ah been able tuh find out" and "so fur as Ah can see," but Nanny does not really leave a space for alternative roles for black women. Because she invokes the idea that "[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world," Nanny limits Janie's possibilities in regard to what womanhood or muliebrity might mean.

In the midst of her sermon, Nanny recalls the threats of her mistress upon discovering that Nanny had given birth to a baby "wid gray eyes and yaller hair" (17). Nanny tries to pacify the angry mistress by speaking in self-deprecating terms: "'Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave'" (17). However, the mistress responds by promising to "cut de hide offa yo' yaller back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo' bare back" (17). This punishment recalls the folktale "Why They Always Use Rawhide on a Mule" found in *Mules and Men* and reinforces the link between the silenced black woman and the mule.

Nanny's speech continues the association of black womanhood with negative animal imagery:

Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. . . . Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. . . . Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. (15-16)

In this passage Nanny reflects on the ways in which she has been silenced and made to labor and bear offspring like a farm animal, yet she also seems to be trying to get beyond this to empower Janie. As she says earlier, "Ah been prayin' fur it tuh be different wid you" (14). However, Nanny's words only go so far as prayer—they are not meant to incite action. It seems that, despite her best intentions, Nanny does not know how to free herself or Janie from the restrictions of a world which seeks to silence them. They are constrained in the double bind of being both black and female. Thus, according to Nanny, they are in the lowest position in the social hierarchy—they are dehumanized and

made into mules who must carry the double weight of both the white man's and the black man's burdens.

Nanny's sermon, through its connection between mules and silenced females, raises the question of whether the black woman can ever speak, can ever give voice to her ideas and emotions in a meaningful way. Nanny is "prayin' fur it tuh be different" for Janie, and she saves "de text" for her "to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high" if Janie would "just take a stand on high ground lak [Nanny] dreamed" (14, 16). Nanny, however, seems to be projecting contradictory messages; she tells Janie of her dreams for her at the same time she is trying to teach Janie a lesson about the silenced and dehumanized position of the African-American female. In addition, Nanny is concerned only with her own views. She doesn't listen to Janie in order to find out what she wants, to hear what her hopes and dreams include. Nanny rushes to "protect" Janie from her new-found sexual desires, and she ends up silencing her in the process: "Nanny's words made Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain" (12).

Shortly after this kiss, Nanny rushes Janie into a loveless marriage with Logan Killicks. Nanny reveres Logan because of his wealth and the fact that he has "de onliest organ in town . . . a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road" (22). Janie soon discovers that life with Logan is nothing like her experience under the pear tree, and this lack of marital bliss works to silence her. The first indication that Logan will not use just the image of the mule, but rather its literal presence, to silence Janie comes when she complains that his "toe-nails look lak mule foots" (23). These feet will eventually try to stomp out Janie's spirit as Logan looks for a mule to work "his often-mentioned sixty acres" (20).²

As time goes on, Logan makes more and more demands on Janie to perform physical labor around the farm. One day he tells her he is going "over tuh Lake

²The fact that Logan Killicks owns sixty acres of land is particularly notable in the post-Civil War years where the best most African-Americans could hope for was "forty acres and a mule," as the old saying goes. Historians William L. Barney and James M. McPherson document General Sherman's Special Field Order Number 15, which was issued in January, 1865, "to relieve his army of the burden of caring for thousands of black refugees who sought its protection" (Barney 242). This order allowed black families to settle forty acres of land under temporary titles. However, the land distribution was overturned by President Johnson in August, 1865, when he pardoned the former Confederate owners and returned their land and property, forcing blacks off the land (Barney 242, McPherson 164-65). "Thus while the government had freed the slaves, it did little to help them get on their feet. Without the opportunity to make a decent living, the Negroes' freedom was only partial, and the unhappy consequences of that partial freedom are still with us today" (McPherson 165).

City tuh see uh man about uh mule" (25). When Janie wonders why he wants two mules he answers rather obliquely, "Ah needs two mules dis yeah . . . Ah aims to run two plows, and dis man Ah'm talkin' 'bout is got a mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im" (26). Janie, who is slowly being silenced and turned into the mule Nanny warned her about, does not question Logan's actions. She allows him to leave, and in his absence Jody Starks arrives. When Janie tells Jody "Mah husband is gone tuh buy a mule fuh me to plow" (27-28), Jody is incredulous and responds, "'You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid a plow than a hog is got wid uh holiday!'" (28). Thus, Jody plants the idea in Janie that she has an alternative to becoming Logan's beast of burden.

Logan, however, is actively engaged in silencing Janie, and he refuses to hear the real meaning behind her words when Janie asks what he'd do if she "wuz to run off and leave [him] sometime" (29). Because he has already made his plan to put Janie to work behind a mule, he fails to hear her feelings in regard to this issue. Significantly, Janie's position in this scheme is literally *behind* a mule, reflecting her place in Logan's social hierarchy where she will be ranked even lower than the mule. When she tries to make her voice heard, and reasserts that her place is in the domestic sphere, he tells her, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (30). Logan attempts to further silence Janie by yelling, "You better dry up in dere!" (30). He means for her to be quiet and stop talking back to him, but the irony is that she is literally drying up and withering inside in this loveless marriage in which her voice is continually silenced. In a final assertion of his voice, Logan insults her with the dehumanizing words "God damn yo' hide!" and Janie is again reduced to the level of the mute mule. She does not speak to Logan, but instead makes the decision to leave him without a word of explanation.

SallyAnn Ferguson, in "Folkloric Men and Female Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," draws a connection between Janie's decision to leave Logan and the story of Matt Bonner's yellow mule by arguing that Janie's rebellion is "analogous to that of an actual mule later in the novel—a dumb animal that stubbornly refuses until death to submit to an even dumber man" (187). There exists, however, a revealing (although, I suspect, unintended) pun in Ferguson's statement about the "dumb animal." "Dumb," in addition to meaning stupid, is frequently used as a colloquial expression for a non-speaking person, a person who is silent or silenced. Matt Bonner's yellow mule and Janie are far from stupid, but they are both at the center of the speech vs. silence controversy that arises in the fourth mule site of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Sharon Davie has likewise commented on the connection between mules and women at this point in Hurston's text. She notes that

the story of the freeing, death, and funeral of Matt Bonner's mule echoes with complexity the historical linking of blacks and animals in the great chain of being. Hurston creates the framework for a multilayered irony by reminding readers of another Western cliché of otherness: women's animality and supposedly inferior ability to reason. (449)

Janie's role in the saga of Matt Bonner's yellow mule reveals a marked transformation in her character from the silenced wife, Mrs. Mayor Starks, to the new woman of Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods who gives voice to her thoughts in an unbridled manner.

When the yellow mule is first introduced into the text, Hurston makes it clear that Janie's forced silence in the discourse surrounding the mule is just one more example of the ways Jody Starks tries to keep his wife isolated from the rest of the town. "Everybody indulged in mule talk. He was next to the Mayor in prominence, and made better talking. Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge" (50). The reason Joe gives for his behavior is that "[h]e didn't want her talking after such trashy people" (50). He continually distances her from the townspeople and their discourse by pointing out that she is "Mrs. Mayor Starks" and that he can't understand why she "would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in" (50-51). He concludes of such talk that "'Tain't no earthly use" (51).

However, the talk is of some earthly use, contrary to what Jody claims. In Janie's eyes such talk is a necessity, not a mere "indulgence." She does "treasure" the talk—or at least the possibility of community interaction that it entails. Jody himself is able to partake of the communal discourse while maintaining his distance from it.

Janie noted that while he didn't talk the mule himself, he sat and laughed at it But when Lige or Sam or Walter or some of the other big picture talkers were using the side of the world for a canvas, Joe would hustle her inside the store to sell something. Look like he took pleasure in doing it. (51)

This passage reveals another of Joe's techniques for silencing Janie. He continually removes her physically from "the big picture talkers" by sending her into the store to "sell something." It is ironic that Janie is restricted to

selling goods in the store rather than being able to give of herself, to freely share her ideas in the community conversation.

Hurston leads from this mule-talkers episode into a discussion of Jody's sexual jealousy embodied in the act of ordering Janie to wear a head rag at all times in the store. He has done his best to bind and gag his wife, and this desire to silence Janie has a physical manifestation in the head rag which conceals and restrains her beautiful hair. Hurston moves from the head rag to the mule imagery, writing: "She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others. But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him. Take the matter of the yellow mule, for instance" (52).

The text then returns to the tale of Matt Bonner's mule, a folk story that bears remarkable similarity to the account of Brazzle's yellow mule in Hurston's short story "The Bone of Contention." Ellease Southerland, in "The Influence of Voodoo on the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," traces the color symbolism of these mules, noting that "the color gives a memorable brilliance to his form and also comments on a gold-oriented society willing to exchange the integrity of a whole people [African-Americans] for economic well-being" (176). Southerland adds that "in addition to the brilliance, the emphasis on mulatto is suggested by the striking color of a beast who is underfed and overworked" (177). This imagery of mixed racial heritage further likens the yellow mule to Janie, a woman whose birthright is a legacy of white men raping black women.

Janie illustrates her sympathy for the mule when she reacts strongly against the mule-baiting. She cannot bear to watch "the spectacle" and mutters to herself: "They ought to be ashamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked to death, done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin' 'im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid 'em all" (53). Again, the parallels between the mule, the slave, and the silenced woman are obvious, and all Janie can do is look away and mutter to herself.

Joe stops the mule-baiting, but Janie doesn't "say anything" to him, and she goes off "without a word" to get a pair of shoes that he has requested (53-54). Nevertheless, Janie remains angry and wants to speak up about the mule, but she thinks to herself, "But Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard to git along" (54). This passage reveals that Janie has, by this point, internalized the silencing of her husband and is censoring herself. Janie's self-censure will be short-lived, however.

After Joe buys the mule, the townspeople observe him in "respectful silence" before they all agree that his action was a "noble thing" (54). Janie stands still

and listens to the comments of the townspeople before she mocks her husband with an invective that the others fail to perceive:

Jody, dat wuz a mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh power tuh free things and that makes you lak uh king uh something. (55)

Joe's actions are diminished under the harsh mockery of Janie's words. Her allusion to Abraham Lincoln draws a connection between the mule and enslaved blacks, "clearly satirizing the so-called freeing of the slaves and the pretense that they are treated as equals by society" (Morris and Dunn 7). Janie's invective points up Joe's inadequacies as it serves not to elevate him to the level of a historical figure but to belittle the power he has to free the mule and to govern the town. Janie thereby silences Joe, and "he never said a word" in response to her speech (55). The townspeople, however, proclaim Janie "uh born orator. . . . [who] put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts" (55).

After Joe buys the animal, the mule becomes the talk of the town more than ever. "New lies sprung up about his free-mule doings" (55). These stories and adventures illustrate how the mule upsets the hierarchy of the town and its inhabitants. The freed mule is linked to social displacement, and "a vision of reality as indeterminate, as too transient, diverse, and inconsistent ever to be fixed in hierarchy emerges. The text itself becomes like the trickster of the African folk imagination . . ." (Davie 448).

The trickster-mule is as celebrated in his death as he was in life. When everyone assembles for the "dragging-out" of the mule carcass, Janie indicates to her husband that she wants to attend the mock funeral as well. Jody tells her that she cannot go along. However, he adds that he's going because "they's liable to need me tuh say uh few words over de carcass" as he informs Janie that she "ain't goin' off in all dat mess uh commonness" (56). In this action Joe claims the privilege of speech for himself, and he withholds it from Janie. He presupposes Janie's silence as he says "Ah'm surprised at yuh fur askin' [to go to the funeral]" (56). The town commences the "dragging-out," leaving a silenced Janie "standing in the doorway" (57). Janie's position on the threshold is symbolic of her readiness to cross over into a way of life where she refuses to be silenced by her husband. The death of the mule signifies on the death of woman-as-mule as it prefigures the discovery of Janie's public voice (Dalgarno 527). As Joseph Urgo has noted, Jody

has good reason to fear the incisive, cutting wit foreshadowed by Janie's commentary on the mule episode. Later, when he tries to humiliate Janie in his store, she verbally destroys him with that wit, revealing in public his sexual inadequacies by pointing to the "change of life" inside his pants. (49)

Before this can happen, however, Hurston gives Jody his final moment in the limelight as he begins the mock funeral "with a great eulogy" which "the people loved" and which "made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done" (57). Throughout the speech, he stood "on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures" (57). His eulogy is an attempt at self-aggrandizement, and he, significantly, stands on the dead mule in order to make himself heard, just as those in power stand on the silenced.

Joe continues to try to silence Janie after the mock funeral (59, 66-67, 70-71), but she decides that she "wasn't [going to be] petal-open anymore with him" (67). She learns to use silence to protect herself. "No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She had learned to talk some and leave some" (72). Janie, however, holds out hope that her life might change: "Sometimes she stuck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was" (72). Like the trickster in "The Talking Mule," she is saving her verbal powers for a surprise attack.

This attack comes in the form of the fight in the store where Jody attempts to humiliate Janie. She breaks free from her silence and "took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before" (74). They engage in a verbal sparring match which culminates in Janie's insult: "When you pull down yo' britches you look lak de change uh life" (75). Henry Louis Gates reads this as Janie signifying on Joe, "telling him that he not only is nothing but a man, but an *impotent* man at that." Gates adds that "the revelation of the truth kills him. Janie, in effect, has *rewritten* Joe's text of himself and liberated herself in the process" (162). Thus we can see that Janie has finally escaped the bondage of silence that Joe sought to impose on her. She is free, and she is born again as a new woman and a speaking subject.

Janie has the last word in her relationship with Joe as she forces her way into the bedroom where he lies on his deathbed and speaks her mind. She says, "Ah come in heah tuh talk widja and Ah'm gointuh do it too. It's for both our sakes Ah'm talkin'" (81). Janie speaks of silence, voice, and listening and she accuses Joe of being "[t]oo busy listening tuh [his] own big voice" (82). She ends by expressing her dissatisfaction with "[a]ll dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice" (82). After Joe dies, Janie "thought back and forth about what

had happened in the making of a voice out of a man" (83). She also reflects on herself and realizes that she has become her own person by being able to give voice to her ideas and emotions. This self-evaluation allows the reader to see that Janie has crossed the boundary from "mule" into muliebrity.

In the last half of the novel, the references to mules disappear as Janie continues to use her voice and her relationship with Tea Cake progresses. Because she is in a give-and-take relationship and she has joined a community on the muck, Janie experiences the freedom of speaking her mind. Hurston emphasizes the joy of this ability to communicate by writing: "Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to" (128). Janie is "sorry for her friends back there" in Eatonville who cannot know the liberating joy she feels through her new sense of community and communication. We see that Janie is learning and growing every day as "[s]he got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (128). Her transition from silence to speech is likewise revealed by the fact that she joins in the verbal games of the community, the "woofing" and "boogerboo" (128).

By the end of the text, we can see that Janie has completed the journey from mule to muliebrity. She achieves this growth to the degree that she is now able to give voice to her ideas and emotions. Janie may still be restricted and silenced in some ways at the end of the text, but, to a large degree, she is free to speak her mind. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, therefore, functions as a celebratory "exploration of a woman's consciousness accompanied by an assertion of that woman's right to selfhood" (Hemenway 232). Hurston employs the folkloric symbol of the mule to reveal the ways in which the African-American female can be dehumanized and silenced by society. Through her use of mule imagery, Hurston challenges all of us to examine African-American culture and the values on which it is built. "Those values could restore the balance," as Cheryl A. Wall writes. "They could give men and women words to speak. They could set their spirits free" (392).

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