3

Mule

Work might be better conceptualized by examining the range of work that African-American women actually perform. Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening—the type of work long associated with Black women's status as "mule." Alienated labor can be paid—the case of Black women in domestic service, those Black women working as dishwashers, dry-cleaning assistants, cooks, and health-care assistants, as well as some professional Black women engaged in corporate mammy work; or it can be unpaid, as with the seemingly never-ending chores of many Black grandmothers and Black single mothers. But work can also be empowering and creative, even if it physically challenging and appears to be demeaning.

—Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

My principal question, phrased plainly, is: what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?

—Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

Throughout Zora Neale Hurston's corpus, we find any number of moments marked by the presence of nonhuman animals that buck expectations rooted in a normative zoological framework for creaturely behavior—consider the goat that flags a train in *Mules and Men* or the revenge-seeking rattlesnake in her short story "Sweat"—but nowhere is this desire to render the insurgent potential of animal life more vividly on display than in her 1937 masterwork *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Therein, Hurston crafts a world in which animals perform species in a fashion that destabilizes and defamiliarizes normative expectations around not only animal interiority but also animal *sociality.* My aim herein is to offer an alternative reading of the way that the figure of the mule, in particular, appears in the text, one that strains against the grain of how the mule has historically been marked in twentieth-century literary criticism and elsewhere, that is, as largely or *solely* a site of gendered oppression, labor that is taken for granted and rendered imperceptible. Though I will argue that these regulatory forces are often at work when the mule appears on the scene as a signifier, I will also argue that such forces are never the totality of what

is present, that muleness indeed represents otherworldly duress but also the potential for an otherwise world, that is, a radically different set of social and political relations, in the midst of and in spite of that constraint.

Hence, what follows is an extended reading of the way that muleness moves through the text as an analytic of power, how Hurston returns to the figure of the mule again and again—sometimes even when there are no mules *as such* present in a given scene—in order to elucidate the power relations that produce the mule as a form of animal life, which is also to say, a creature invented *for the sake of labor and labor alone,* as well as a useful metonym for describing the experiences of black women living under patriarchy's unremitting pressures. Through a close reading of several key scenes from the text and an engagement with black feminist thinkers such as Hortense Spillers, I intend to make an argument for the mule as an especially generative site of inquiry and imagination not only in Hurston's oeuvre but in the field of black literary theory more broadly. I seek to illuminate the ways in which a critical engagement with muleness—both as a zoological category with its own fraught history as it pertains to agriculture and subsistence farming in the Americas and as a useful metonym for thinking about the nature of black social life—opens up a number of different avenues through which we might approach *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a part of Hurston's broader corpus, wherein bestial presence is almost always a narrative element that must be reckoned with. This chapter is intended to reflect the inherent *multiplicity* of muleness as a means of indexing value, as well as to keep track of the indeterminate, uncanny workings of the black feminine in a text that is deeply concerned with how we might read persistence, even abundance, in spaces and, most centrally, onto

forms of human and nonhuman life that are traditionally marked as nonsites, as vitalized forms of death. It is precisely this critical practice of valuing black and nonhuman life, over and against dominant ways of thinking about or assigning such value, that Hurston wants us to consider when muleness enters the frame.

Whenever Hurston gestures toward the mule, it is a call for us to keep an eye on those that are rendered invisible, whether by force of law or by quotidian social practice. It is the seemingly banal nature of the moments that Hurston draws our attention to, the casualness of the violence deployed against the black women who are treated and discussed as "mules" in the text—as well as the *actual* mules that also make an appearance as these women's metonymic counterparts and fellow targets of men who treat said violence as an explicit means of control or even, oftentimes, recreation—that are of central concern here. Muleness is inextricably linked to this sort of routine violation: the taken-for-granted suffering that occurs beyond the power or purview of social accountability.

Still, this is not all that the figure of the mule makes available to us. Though Hurston certainly returns to the mule repeatedly as a site of unspoken and unspeakable violence, there are also other moments in the novel when it becomes clear that Hurston is interested in the mule as a site of political possibility, of radical imagination set free by misrecognition. Put differently, in addition to functioning as a site of invisibilized suffering and invisibilized labor, the mule also represents a certain kind of *invisibilized interiority,* a black feminist apositionality that bears a striking resemblance to something like freedom in the hold, like fugitivity, like Linda Brent crafting a new life and a new vision from within the loophole of retreat, using the epistolary form to take flight, though

she could neither walk nor stand.[1] Thus, when Hurston describes the black woman as the mule of the world, it is clear that this is not only a claim about suffering. For Hurston, muleness is how we might think about black women's kinesthetic and otherwise brilliance in a world bent on their capture. It is how Janie Crawford and the larger ensemble of women she is a part of in this timeless, precious text laugh and lilt and love, knowing they were never meant to survive.[2]

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From the first time the mule appears on the scene as a representation of the black feminine, it is abundantly clear that muleness is inextricably linked to a certain recalcitrance, or refusal to be owned, over and against a set of social relations centered on the treatment of black women's every thought, deed, or movement as a form of private property. This relationship between gender and property, between the dominant order and the otherwise possibilities that the mule carries in its wake, is further elaborated on by Janie's grandmother Nanny early on in the novel:

> You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de holdbacks of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. 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. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got

> another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground like Ah dreamed.[3]

Here, the figure of the dream appears not as a dream deferred but as a dream destroyed by material circumstance. That dream, in this instance, differs from Janie's first dead dream in the novel—concerned as it was, primarily, with pleasure and autonomy in the midst of a monogamous love relationship.[4] This is a dream with a different, though related, set of stakes, a dream of access to the province of the human in ways that black women have been barred from historically.

With stunning regularity, Nanny turns to animal figures in order to give an account of her life experience. Her "dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do" are in direct conflict with her being "used for a work-ox and a brood-sow" by those who claimed legal ownership over her flesh, her labor, and indeed her very life. Though the mule is not explicitly invoked in this passage, its haunting presence is nonetheless felt in the language used to describe the daily experiences of black women living under the conditions of chattel slavery. There is not only the constant threat of interpersonal violence, both physical and psychic, at the hands of men—as we see so vividly in Janie's relationships—but an expulsion from the field

of the human subject, the self-possessed agent in control of the functions of one's own body. What appears instead is a vision of life as an invention, a machine, what Marx might call "a speaking implement."[5] For Nanny, the black feminine is a site marred by its relationship to death and quotidian violence, but it is not only that. As she reminds the reader early on, "Nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will."

Though Nanny spends her days in the midst of what many people would call unlivable conditions, she keeps right on wishing, dreaming, sketching out a line of flight. This enactment of the freedom drive is directly linked to the "queer ways" that Nanny describes in the opening lines of the passage.[6] That is, it is exactly the sort of rootlessness that Nanny gives language to, a rootlessness that is also an ongoing, lived critique of patriarchal models of family structure, and kinship broadly construed, which feeds her radical imagination, her meditative tenacity in the face of gratuitous violence. These queer ways are intimately linked to Hortense Spillers's claim in her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" regarding the ways in which the black feminine operates in contrast to, and as a criticism of, normative hierarchies and cartographies of gender:

> But I would make a distinction . . . between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. . . . As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture, . . . these lacerations, wounding, fissures,

> tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, and punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural *vestibularity* and the *culture*. . . . This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.[7]

Spillers goes on to elaborate on this relationship between captivity, flesh, and vestibularity, naming the black woman, and the black feminine in a broader sense, as a locale at which these three terms intersect with peculiar force:

> The flesh is the concentration of "ethnicity" that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this "flesh and blood" entity, in the vestibule (or "pre-view") of a colonized North America, that is essentially rejected from "The Female Body in Western Culture," but it makes good theory, or commemorative "herstory" to want to "forget" or have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because of the "overseer," standing at the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh "ungendered"—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.[8]

What new possibilities for thinking about the relationship between blackness, gender, and animal life emerge if we take seriously Spillers claim here about both the flesh and what she calls *vestibularity?* How might we reconcile such theorizing with Nanny's own philosophy of race, labor, and gender, in which the very ungendering that Spillers names here is described through the aforementioned invocations of the work-ox and the brood-sow? For Nanny, then, as for Spillers, ungendering is also a transformation *at the level of species;* it is how one is forcibly removed from the province of the human and placed elsewhere.

This violence that both Spillers and Nanny name is what bars the flesh from entering the realm of the body; it is this very availability to such violence and violation that is part of what constitutes the flesh *as such.* And yet the flesh is not only or always a site of terror. It is also, according to Spillers, a site of endless possibility. The flesh, as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, "supersedes the ontological distinction . . . between the animal and the human."[9] The flesh, in the first instance, is shared and is not inextricably linked to the image of a self-possessed subject that has no need for sociality. Hence, when Spillers invokes the vestibule, positing black flesh as vestibular to what she calls US American "culture," we know that she is also gesturing toward the myriad social possibilities that the flesh makes available to us, possibilities that the body cannot contain or condone.

After all, what is the vestibule if not a space for outsiders? For sinners and latecomers too tired from last night's revelry to rise with the saints? Spiller's invocation of the vestibule is also a call to envision unorthodox forms of social life, to blur the lines between person and thing, human and animal, that the historically marginalized might gather together in the name of a far more

compelling project, one more true to the countless, uncanny lives that have never fit within subjectivity's narrow borders. When we take the vestibule seriously as a site for gathering, we are able to read the conflict between Jody and Janie as not only a moment of unethical, interpersonal violence but also an occasion to reckon with what such terror produces and forecloses. Jody's desire to rule Janie, to dominate her and all that she lays her hands to, closes him off to an entire world that Janie has access to, a world in which "flies [are] tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage" and "a dust-bearing bee sink[s] into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch[ing] to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight."[10] As Hurston's descriptions of Janie's sense of the natural world throughout the text make clear, Janie's pervasive boredom during her time with Logan or her fear and shame during her time with Jody are not totalizing forces. In spite of and alongside these unrelenting impositions, Janie develops the capacity for ethical relation with other forms of life that are also made subject to the violent whims of men. In this sense, Janie moves through the text as an ecofeminist figure par excellence, one who is always thinking capaciously about the ecological realm and the constellation of affects that it produces.[11] This too is an example of the "insurgent ground" of the female social subject that Spillers references toward the end of her essay.[12] This is what lingering in the vestibule makes possible.

Rather than aspire to domination or control, Janie instead lives into the myriad communal potentialities of the flesh and, in the process, is able to achieve something akin to solidarity with the nonhuman actors all around her:

> Take for instance the case of Matt Bonner's yellow mule. They had him up for conversation every day the Lord sent. Most especial if Matt was there himself to listen. Sam and Lige and Walter were the ringleaders of the mule-talkers. The others threw in whatever they could chance upon, but it seemed as if Sam and Lige and Walter could hear and see more about that mule than the whole county put together. All they needed was to see Matt's long spare shape coming down the street and by the time he got to the porch they were ready for him. . . . When the mule was in front of the store, Lum went out and tackled him. The brute jerked up his head, laid back his ears and rushed to the attack. Lum had to run for safety. Five or six more men left the porch and surrounded the fractious beast, goosing him in the sides and making him show his temper. But he had more spirit left than body. He was soon panting and heaving from the effort of spinning his old carcass about. Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting. All but Janie. She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. "They oughta beshamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh 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."[13]

What Janie enacts in this scene is a form of interspecies empathy that bears no resemblance to a limited, *self-serving* vision of humaneness but is instead a reckoning with the suffering of nonhuman beings that demands intercession, if only at the level of desire. Though she cannot act on the mule's behalf in the way that she wants, cannot intercede and enact physical violence against the men tormenting the mule that it might go free, she dares to bear

witness, to give voice to what she has seen even if it is only a whisper, a muttering once her head is turned in revulsion. That this is *all she can reasonably do,* that is, speak of the unremitting violence she has witnessed, demands our attention.

What is more, the profound anger Janie expresses toward these men is, all on its own, a radical intervention given prevailing historical and contemporary discourses around the supposed incapacity of black people as it pertains to the love and care of nonhuman animal lives.[14] What blossoms at the intersection of these two components of the scene—both Janie's overwhelming rage and the quiet protest that, due to her social position, serves as its only reflection in the material world—is a black feminist approach to engaging bestial presence that returns throughout the novel. Though Janie cannot physically lash out here, cannot harm the men the way they are harming the mule or even attempt to gain revenge by taking on the mule's approach to resistant practice—*charging and missing, charging and missing*—she dares to imagine an alternate approach to the organization of human and nonhuman life and eventually gives voice to that imagining. Ultimately, it is this quiet dissent that serves as the condition of possibility for the mule's release. Jody, having overheard Janie without her knowing it, stops laughing when he realizes how she feels about the abuse of Matt Bonner's mule, and he eventually uses his influence to bring the scene to a halt: "Lum, I god, dat's enough! Y'all done had yo' fun now. Stop yo' foolishness and go tell Matt Bonner Ah wants tuh have uh talk wid him right away."[15]

After haggling with Bonner for several minutes, Jody purchases the mule, effectively setting him free to live out his last days without the threat of the yoke or a stranger's fist. During this period, the "free mule," as the townspeople come to refer to him, becomes the

subject of all manner of fables, what the narrator refers to as "lies . . . about his free-mule doings."[16] Thus, it is through the social practices of gossip, and *storying,* that the free mule becomes recognizable as a citizen of the town.[17] Through his entry into the forms of orature that the townspeople hold dear, he comes to be granted a personhood not limited to the law or the boundaries of zoological discourse. Through his manumission at the hands of Jody, which was itself the result of Janie Crawford's quiet protestations, the free mule's life comes to represent something other than a citizenship bound to the province of the human and, what is more, a critique of that very category, barred from it as he was only moments before his purchase:

> But way after a while he died. Lum found him under the big tree on his raw bony back with all four feet up in the air. That wasn't natural and it didn't look right, but Sam said it would have been more unnatural for him to have laid down on his side and died like any other beast. He had seen Death coming and had stood his ground and fought it like a natural man. He had fought it to the last breath. Naturally he didn't have time to straighten himself out. Death had to take him like it found him. When the news got around, it was like the end of a war or something like that. Everybody that could knocked off from work to stand around and talk. But finally there was nothing to do but drag him out like all other dead brutes. Drag him out to the edge of the hammock which was far enough off to satisfy sanitary conditions in the town. The rest was up to the buzzards.[18]

The moment the free mule dies, any number of dominant categories are blurred beyond recognition or rescue. Somehow, all at once, the free mule is a "natural man" and a beast and a brute, a prophet

that foresees death and a warrior willing to fight it until he can no longer stand. Such multiplicity—that is, the naming of the mule as the nexus of all these divergent figures through which human and nonhuman life is described or else held at bay—is the product of a broader commitment to thinking critically about entanglement, and *interior life,* that permeates the text, a willingness to engage all living things within the world of the novel, both human and nonhuman, as entities that are always already in motion, in process, and thus composed of untold, untapped possibilities. To give an account of the mule's death in the fashion that the townspeople do is to count him as one of their own, to dethrone normative approaches to thinking about the chain of being in favor of an unbounded constellation of affects and assemblages, hierarchy laid low for the sake of relation. That such a decision is made in the wake of the free mule suffering various forms of physical and psychic violence at the hands of Matt Bonner, Lum, and others is of no small consequence.

Here, Hurston is pushing the reader to consider the townspeople's radical imagination as it pertains to the animal's potential for sociality, as well as their all-too-human pettiness. What is evident both in the aftermath of the mule's death and in the novel's opening scene in which the townspeople are described not only as having their bodies "occupied" by brutes but also as having made "burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs"—which for Hurston, I would argue, is a means of describing the lyrical quality of the town gossip and a means of engaging the unabashed meanness that attends such forms of black social life—is that the townspeople are as capable of uncompromising love as they are of unabashed cruelty.[19] The vision of these everyday folks that Hurston provides is one capacious enough to

allow for both slander and loving celebration and reflects just the sort of counter-representational ethos that guides the novel and served as the grounds for much of the criticism surrounding it in the moment of its publication.[20]

Muleness, in this passage, operates both as a means of thinking commonality—that is, the experience of black women is akin to that of the actual nonhuman mules that appear in the novel, and that alone serves as the engine of one of the text's guiding metaphors—and as an argument that such proximity, such vestibularity, actually lays the foundation for ethical action beyond what other characters in the scene can fathom or are willing to enact on their own. Janie's willingness to side with the mule, to say *yes* to the call for ethical relation, serves as the condition of possibility for the free mule to become a kind of cult hero, to *simply be left alone*. This letting-be that Janie makes room for allows the free mule to die outside the marketplace and its extractive logic, to die instead among the trees, valiant still, even in defeat. Though he must eventually go where all other brutes go, we understand from Hurston's characterization of nonhuman animals throughout the novel that whatever a brute may be, it is certainly not a symbolic stand-in for emptiness or the absence of will. The brute, for Hurston, is not always a political actor, but it is certainly a social one.[21] Hurston's brute is no subject, nor is it germane to the genre of Man. The brute instead operates as a critique of both these categories simultaneously, unmooring them, unmasking them as hollow positions devoid of fleshly life, what, thinking alongside Spillers, we might imagine as a kind of vestibular proximity: barred from the protections and protocols of Man but adjacent to all other forms of life banned from that blood-stained province. Hurston is clear on the

matter. Within the universe of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* brutes are not socially or otherwise dead.

Thus, when the townspeople claim that death took the free mule like a natural man, it is a radical revision of the Western philosophical tradition's most pervasive ideas about death, a rebuttal to what Martin Heidegger would call the animal's unavailability to death as such, its capacity to "perish" but not die.[22] There are resonances of a counter-Heideggerian critique in other parts of Hurston's corpus, for example, the first line of her famous autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road,* where Hurston writes, "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say."[23] Though one could read this line as merely a gesture toward the physical makeup of rocks as a form of nonhuman, ostensibly inorganic matter—or, put differently, that it is in the very nature of stones to bear the trace of their formational processes, their smoothness or roughness a sign of gradual erosion over time—there is also here, implicitly, the notion that stones possess a mind or some other, radically divergent form of interiority. When Hurston refers to rocks as "dead-seeming," there are not only resonances of performance, that is, *playing* dead, but also an argument about the limits of empiricism. Though the rocks in question might certainly appear to be lifeless, for Hurston, such appearances do not carry the day. In a Heideggerian register, such a claim doubles as an argument that rocks are not without access to the world, which is also to say, without a tether to experience—it is important to note here that Heidegger claims outright in his classic comparison between various forms of organic and inorganic matter that stones and plants are "without world," that animals

are "poor-in-the world," and that humans "have world"—but rather exist on a plane that is largely opaque to human perception.[24] In saying that the free mule dies as a *natural man,* then, Hurston prefigures Heidegger's argument, shutting it down in advance.

Indeed, over and against Heidegger's vision of nonhuman life as that which is naturally given to a kind of poverty or lack, the townspeople make an argument for the free mule's life as a full life, its death as a meaningful death. Even when they are forced to drag him to the end of the town in order to "satisfy sanitary conditions," there is, surrounding the mule, a mythos that serves to elevate him even in the midst of such inhuman—which of course operates as distinct from, but also in conversation with, *nonhuman*—treatment:

> Out in the swamp they made great ceremony over the mule. They mocked everything human in death. Starks led off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him, and the people loved the speech. It made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done. He stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures. When he stepped down, they hoisted Sam up and he talked about the mule as a school teacher first. Then he set his hat like John Pearson and imitated his preaching. He spoke of the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses running through it; and most glorious of all, No Matt Bonner with plow lines and halters to come in and corrupt. Up there, mule-angels would have people to ride on and from his place beside the glittering

> throne, the dear departed brother would look down into hell and see the devil plowing Matt Bonner all day long in a hell-hot sun and laying the rawhide to his back. With that the sisters got mock-happy and shouted and had to be held up by the menfolks. Everybody enjoyed themselves to the highest and then finally the mule was left to the already impatient buzzards. They were holding a great flying-meet way up over the heads of the mourners and some of the nearby trees were already peopled with the stoop-shouldered forms.[25]

What does it cost, or create, when the townspeople dare to mock everything human in death? What is the object and outcome of such derision? At the free mule's funeral, the townspeople dare to imagine alternate worlds in which traditional taxonomies are torn asunder, worlds in which the dominant order of things is inverted and it is mules, not humans, that lay hold to social and political power. This scene of communal storying is one of the book's most resonant instances of black feminist imagination, especially as it pertains to thinking bestial presence. As was the case in the scene in which the free mule first appeared, then Matt Bonner's legal property still, here muleness functions as critical attention to the presence of nonhuman animals and the singular gravity of their suffering, as the willingness to imagine a landscape in which those animals are no longer singular objects of violence and exploitation. There is a radical philosophy of life being offered by those who deliver eulogies at the funeral, but there is also the very matter of their gathering, this assemblage of black persons daring to assert not only that the free mule's life was valuable but that he was one of their own, a citizen. This expansive vision of citizenship is akin to what Sylvia Wynter refers to as the work of the destruction and

"displacement of the genre of the human of Man."[26] It is vestibular sociality: black social life at the edge.

Still, even in death, there are moments when the free mule is treated as a less-than-human entity, none more vivid perhaps than when his flesh is used as the stage on which his eulogies are read. He is still left to die in the hinterlands, abandoned that the buzzards might take him when they are ready. To be sure, during the final scenes in which the free mule appears, he is not treated as a human might expect to be. One suspects that this is precisely the point. When Hurston claims that the townspeople are mocking everything human in death, included within the scope of that claim are the traditional accoutrements of the death-centered event: the casket, the grave, a church building to house the ceremony. In lieu of such adornment, the free mule's funeral happens outside, all so that he might die where he lived, all so that he might be treated, on this final, social occasion, as an animal—in the sense not of the animal as a site of violence or deprivation but rather of the animal as that which is given to the world, that which flourishes outside the confines of the domestic sphere. This is the crux of the interspecies ethics that Hurston maps out for the reader, a way of *being-alongside* that is not rooted in reductive forms of anthropomorphism but in a desire for interconnection akin to what Édouard Glissant maps out when he writes, "For the poetics of relation assumes that to each is proposed the density (the opacity) of the other. . . . Relation is not a mathematics of rapport but a problematic that is always victorious over threats. To live the relation may very well be to measure its convincing fragility."[27] Following Glissant, then, we might read the scene of the free mule's funeral—as well as his unforeseeable inclusion into the town citizenry only paragraphs earlier—as moments that bear out the sort

of fraught exchanges that constitute relation, a collision of opaque actors marked not by smooth collaboration or cohesion but by the collision itself, the very fact of their meeting.

For Glissant, relation is exemplified not by the lifelong bond or the unbreakable phalanx but by strangers screaming in disparate tongues across the void. Relation is found, and freed, in the moments when it is most evasive. Relation is the labor of dragging the free mule to the hinterlands, not only that his body might be given to the earth but also that it might be honored—wept and laughed over. In this sense, the free mule's funeral is the materialized intersection of a black feminist ethic of care and Glissant's vision of "a possible community . . . between mutually liberated opacities, differences, languages."[28] What emerges here, as the finished result of Janie's empathic plea earlier in the chapter, is just such a community, one cohered not by sameness, or even solidarity forged over mutual political interests, but by a liberated opacity bodied forth in everyday acts of stubbornness, foolishness, and joy.

When the townspeople eulogize the free mule, they dare to imagine a fundamentally different world from the one the free mule was made to survive. The vision of mule-heaven rendered here lays low any and all claims to human dominance and superiority and instead offers an eschatology marked by a titanic reversal: the triumph of beast over Man, an order in which justice is meted out against those who once sought to hinder the flourishing of animal lives. That the townspeople include one of their own as the victim of this otherworldly comeuppance—though it is clear at this point in the novel that Matt Bonner is, in no uncertain terms, the least popular man in town—is central to the scene's underlying argument. The very notion of mule-heaven is, at bottom, an acknowledgment of the various ways in which animals are

exploited within the culture of the town. It is a paradise complete with amends for the past life, a front-row seat to watch one's former oppressors burn. What is more, there is no need for physical labor in mule-heaven. The resonances between such a vision and the abolitionist eschatology embedded in Negro spirituals such as "I Want to Go Home" is instructive:

> Dere's no rain to wet you
> O, yes I want to go home
> Dere's no sun to burn you
> O, yes I want to go home;
> O, push along, believers, O, yes
> & Dere's no hard trials, O, yes
> & Dere's no whips a-crackin', O, yes
> & My brudder on de wayside, O, yes
> & O, push along, my brudder, O, yes
> & Where dere's no stormy weather, O, yes
> & Dere's no tribulation[29]

What binds "I Want to Go Home" and Hurston's rendering of mule-heaven is not only their otherworldly, utopian sensibilities but also the centrality of freedom from unjust, unpaid labor to those visions. In both instances, heaven functions as heaven precisely because of the absence of the marketplace and the erasure of the unjust labor relations that, in the case of the mule and the sharecropper, the mule and the slave, the mule and the figure of the black, serve as both a primary site of trauma and a constitutive element of their perceived social identity. To craft the image of a universe in which muleness is not inextricably linked to extracted labor or an ongoing availability to violence is to upend the world, to rend the operative terms from the soil in which they were sown.

It is also a purposeful, countercapitalist linking of blackness and muleness, blackness and animality, that runs counter even to other moments in the novel when animals are deployed as a means of illustrating the exploitative conditions of black life lived under the fist of slavery's long *durée*.

Here and elsewhere, Hurston's foremost commitment is not to cleanliness but to murk, to the dirty, difficult labor of giving language to the historically fraught proximity between black flesh and the beasts of the field. Rather than evade this adjacency, Hurston elaborates on it, giving musculature and music to the cut, making a world from what is widely known as nothingness. Even beyond the mule's funeral as an isolated event, the attention to animal worlds made manifest in that moment pervades the text as a whole and provides important insight into Hurston's investment in the mule as a figure that is necessary to think with when we consider the most radical possible vision of black liberation. For Hurston, at least as it pertains to the world of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* black feminist theorizing is a way of thinking relation, a practice of reading that hinges on one's willingness to pay attention to the flesh—to care for it, even and especially when that flesh is not held precious by the protocols and practices of Man and of the human as it has been historically imagined within the Western philosophical tradition.

Put differently, muleness, as it is deployed not only in the free mule's funeral but indeed in the moments right after, compels us, always, to look where we have not been trained to look:

> As soon as the crowd was out of sight they closed in circles. The near ones got nearer and the far ones got near. A circle, a swoop and a hop with spread-out wings. Close in, close in till some of

the more hungry or daring perched on the carcass. They wanted to begin, but the Parson wasn't there, so a messenger was sent to the ruler in a tree where he sat. The flock had to wait for the white-headed leader, but it was hard. They jostled each other and pecked at heads in hungry irritation. Some walked up and down the beast from head to tail, tail to head. The Parson sat motionless in a dead pine tree about two miles off. He had scented the matter as quickly as any of the rest, but decorum demanded that he sit oblivious until he was notified. Then he took off with ponderous flight and circled and lowered, circled and lowered until the others danced in joy and hunger at his approach.

He finally lit on the ground and walked around the body to see if it were really dead. Peered into its nose and mouth. Examined it well from end to end and leaped upon it and bowed, and the others danced a response. That being over, he balanced and asked:

"What killed this man?"

The chorus answered, "Bare, bare fat."

"What killed this man?"

"Bare, bare fat."

"What killed this man?"

"Bare, bare fat."

"Who'll stand his funeral?"

"We!!!!!"

"Well, all right now."

So he picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on.[30]

Unlike the townspeople, the buzzards do not necessarily mock everything human in death; rather, they animalize what we might

consider to be solely the province of the human. They create their own ceremony around the mule and in doing so refer to him as a man, a man given to death like any other. For the buzzards, the consumption of the dead mule's flesh is both instinct and something other than instinct. There is an order to the proceedings, a decorum that must be acknowledged and adhered to even in this moment of bloody exchange. Hurston turns our attention to the animal world in this scene that we might grasp more fully what she has used the figure of the mule to argue all along, that the animal not only *has a world* but has a world that both encompasses ours and exceeds it, a world that has space for both the funeral and the feasting on the corpse that comes after. In this sense, the buzzards too represent a robust critique of Heidegger's claims about animal experience. Far from worldless, they instead wear the trappings of the (human) world like a garment they can put on and remove at will. They are both in the world and of it; they know its workings well enough to play with its conventions and constraints, precisely *because* of the subjugated position they occupy. For Hurston, the proximity of this scene to the free mule's funeral is also an argument about black humor and the many ways that black social life—by virtue of not only its existence but also its dogged persistence—operates in a similar fashion. Opacity becomes an occasion for analysis, and those who are said to be without an interior grant, once gathered together, the briefest glimpse into the multitudes they contain.

Thus, in this final instance, the mule is again the agent through which we come to understand that animals are as proximate as they are opaque and that it is absurd to assume, as Brian Massumi writes, "that animals do *not* have thought, emotion, desire, creativity, or subjectivity. . . . Is that not to consign animals yet again

to the status of automatons?"[31] On this front, Hurston and Massumi have their feet firmly planted on common ground. Up until the final pages of the novel, all of the animal characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* live into the kind of historically unthought affective, intellectual complexity that Massumi gestures toward. Indeed, in the book's closing movement, it is the animals that foretell the hurricane that will spell the end of Janie's relationship with her third and truest beloved, Tea Cake: "Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. By the time the people left the fields the procession was constant. Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde. People stayed indoors until daylight. Several times during the night Janie heard the snort of big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a panther. Going east and east."[32] To the end, the animals know beyond knowing. In this respect, they differ greatly from the white residents of the nearby towns, as well as Tea Cake, who claims, in what will prove to be a tragically misplaced moment of trust, "De white folks ain't gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it's dangerous."[33] Though Janie wants to heed the warning that the animals' collective flight represents, she chooses instead to honor Tea Cake's sense of the situation before them. And though one can certainly understand Tea Cake's logic—that is, that in a sociopolitical landscape centrally concerned with white safety, keeping tabs on what white folks deem dangerous is always a sound course of action—in the end, it is this reliance on Eurocentric ways of knowing that dooms the pair. Ultimately, Tea Cake will contract rabies from a dog he encounters in the coming flood, and Janie will be forced to shoot him in order to save her own life. That the

novel ends on this note, that is, a major death caused by proximity to the animal, is of critical import. From the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston makes it clear that there is no communion to be had with the animal without the possibility of death. There is no bond unmarred by blood. This, for Hurston, is the work of the figure of the mule as a problem for thought: how we might collaborate across unfathomable distance and think about difference not as an occasion for domination but as an opportunity to sketch a dying world anew.[34]