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The Evolution and Ownership of the Concept of the African-American Woman as  
“The Mule of the World”

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the motif of the African-American woman as the “mule of the world.” The negative connotations of the term originate in slavery and have been influenced by the “cult of true womanhood.” The term itself interrelates to the triple marginalization—that of race, sex, and class—that African American women face. However, black female authors have taken this derogatory meaning and have subsequently given it a positive meaning through the act of Signification, as theorized by Henry Louis Gates. Like their black male predecessors, Maya Angelou (in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and Zora Neale Hurston (in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) break free from the restrictions of language and create a new meaning.

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The evolution of the meaning of words is nothing new to the American experience, for these changes usually happen gradually and somewhat accidentally. However, Black artists have taken an active role in, not only altering, but reversing the pejorative meaning of words. Frederick Douglass, for example, in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, traces his famous reversal of meaning: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; You shall see how a slave became a man” (qtd. in Gates 424). Through this autobiography, Douglass overturns the pervasive belief that blacks were lesser than humans and therefore not men. Similarly, Booker T. Washington, in *Up From Slavery* demonstrates one man’s rise above oppression to success. In the twentieth century, Black women have begun to take up a similar task by redefining the mule of the world motif. This thesis begins with the theoretical and historical background to the mule motif, and moves into a discussion of two representative works, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, that have successfully incorporated and reversed the meaning of the mule motif. This discussion focuses on how these authors turn the mule of the world concept from negative to positive signification.

Full comprehension of this change in signification, and therefore the motif, requires a grasp of Henry Louis Gates’ Theory of the Signifying Monkey. According to Gates, the Signifying Monkey can be traced back to Yoruba (a people of West Africa) tales of Esu-Elegbara, a trickster character, and applied in literature through his role of language manipulation:

Some black genius or community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier [(based on Saussure’s work)] “signification” of its received concepts and

filled this empty signifier with their own concepts. By doing so supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by (white) convention with this particular signifier, they (un)wittingly disrupted the nature of the sign = *signified/signifier* equation itself. (46)

Gates goes on to say that the blacks' act of Signifyin(g) is a "system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition" (47), a "black double-voicedness" (51), which is conceptually unlike white signifying as theorized by Saussure. Roger D. Abrahams explains:

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. . .making fun of a person or situation. . .speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories [to] make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back [and] to ask for a piece of cake by saying, "my brother needs a piece of cake. (qtd. in Gates 54)

In other words, to Signify is to employ any number of rhetorical tropes such as metaphor or irony. By the same process that signify was given a different meaning by deleting the signified and replacing it with their own linguistic system, blacks changed the meaning, or at least gave a "double-voiced" meaning to many offensive and degrading terms such as *girl* and *nigger*. In "A Question of Language," Gloria Naylor explains, "*Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit,

nerve, or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion” (25). She goes on to say:

I don't agree with the argument that use of the word *nigger* at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives. (25)

In much the same way as the African-American race as a whole has owned the highly offensive *nigger*, black female authors employ literature as part of an effort to redefine their role in society both of the past and present, by redefining the term “the mule of the world.”

Before an examination at the process of change can be made, an original definition or interpretation must be established in light of the triple marginalization theory. The mule of the world term has multiple (or triple) dimensions and ramifications—the most literal rendering of which brings one to examine the characteristics of the animal itself. A male donkey and a female horse are bred to produce a mule, “combin[ing] the strength of the horse with the endurance and surefootedness of the ass [(]extensively bred for certain employments for which it is more suited than either; it is ordinarily incapable of procreation. With no good grounds, the mule is a proverbial type of obstinacy [)]” (*OED* Online). According to the American Donkey and Mule

Society, the animal is highly intelligent, and because they refuse to be worked to exhaustion (will not be worked to death) are often wrongfully categorized as stubborn (npr). This animal has been used throughout history as a tool for either manual labor or transportation.

Christopher Columbus brought mules (and those animals required to continue their breeding) to the New World to work for him and his men in the same manner that American colonists in the 1640s imported Africans to labor in their fields (American Mule Society npr). Paula Giddings, author of *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, states, “In its infancy, slavery was particularly harsh. Physical abuse, dismemberment, and torture were common to an institution that was far from peculiar to its victims” (39). This violent enslavement reflects the pervading misconception at the time that blacks were less than human—at least to the point of being classed alongside mules and other animals of labor. In fact, they may have even been a less valuable commodity than mules, for they can reproduce themselves, unlike their “counterparts.” Giddings goes on to say that even though by the 1830s slavery became “domesticated,” no longer characterized by the intense physical cruelty, it was still not free from harm (41). Historian Willie Lee Rose explains:

As physical conditions improved, the slave’s essential humanity was being recognized. But new laws restricting chattels’ movement and eliminating their education indicate blacks were categorized as a special and different kind of humanity, as lesser humans in a dependency assumed to be perpetual. In earlier, harsher times, they had been seen as luckless, unfortunate barbarians. Now they were to be treated as children never expected to grow up. (qtd. in Giddings 42)

Even after the abolition of slavery in 1863, this view was perpetuated; whites denied blacks voting rights, jobs, and education. The treatment and situation of blacks made only gradual and

hard fought improvements into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until the onset of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

With a look at the conditions of slavery, a partial picture of the mule of the world may be obtained. Although the term “mule” as applied to African Americans as a whole is now rather clear, the qualifier “of the world” gives the term a harsher and more specific meaning—the African American (black) woman is called the “mule uh de world” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 14). Not only does she face prejudice because of the color of her skin, and the subsequent poorer economic conditions, the black woman must overcome the societal discriminations imposed upon all women. In other words, to succeed she must overthrow the bonds of her triple marginalization (that of race, class, and sex). Maya Angelou describes the plight of her race this way:

The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hates and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (272)

This marginalization either crushed the spirit of the black woman or forced her to become the strong independent woman described by Angelou. However, this emerging woman was indeed a “formidable character” because this black ideal of womanhood opposed the prevalent white ideal of womanhood.

In the latter years of slavery, Victorian ideals and the resulting “cult of true womanhood”



dominated American thought about the behavior and character of women. Feminist historian Barbara Welter states in her article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” that “the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. . .with them she was promised happiness and power” (152). In her work *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel V. Carby explains that these virtues are linked to physical appearance, as well as behavior—a genteel and chaste (white) woman possesses delicate, beautiful features, fair hair, and blue eyes. Her purpose in life is to marry, bear children, and take care of the house; any kind of “overt sexuality” disqualified her from being a true woman (26-7). These parameters set the stage for the white female stereotype and what would become the diametrically opposite one of the black woman.

Although few, if any, white women lived up to this standard, no black woman, especially in the time of slavery, could even come close to fulfilling this universalized ideal. Carby mentions that a black woman necessitated strength and endurance (whereas a white woman was praised for frailty and physical weakness); her domestic role could not measure up because of the time she spent working in the fields, and her voicelessness and vulnerability caused white men to prey to her—even in cases of rape, she was thought to have submitted willingly because it did not destroy her (26-8). Because the Cult of True Womanhood had become the universalized concept of womanhood unconsciously accepted by men and women alike, and because the black woman did not, could not, conform to this societal ideal, the black female was excluded from womanhood. In her famous speech “Ar’n’t I a Woman,” Sojourner Truth expresses her fury at the absurdity of their idea of robbing a black woman of her womanhood:

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober

ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place, and ar'n't I a woman? [...] I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man can head me—ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as any man (when I could get it) and bear de lash as well—ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? (248)

Carby goes on to say that even after slavery was abolished black females continued to be labeled either Jezebel (the brazen sexually driven wild woman) or Mammy (the submissive servant who catered to the needs of whites) (29). Any black woman who sought to assert independence from her husband or to not take a husband fit into the Jezebel category—her black husband and other black men imposed on her the qualities of the “cult of true womanhood” (with the exception of frailty). Therefore, Hurston's and Angelou's attempts at reversal of the mule motif are also attempts to overturn these stereotypes and create a new black female identity.

With the combination of the racial and economic effects of slavery and the societal role imposed upon all women, the term “mule of the world” became a metaphor for this triple marginalization experienced by black women. According to Cheryl A. Wall, Professor of African-American Literature at Rutgers University, the literary use of the metaphor originates from the folk tale “Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest,” which is included in Zora Neale Hurston's book of folklore, *Mules and Men*. In the tale the term “mules” is not limited to black females but instead is representative of black people as a whole. Wall goes on to explain the shift of the burden from the black man to the black woman: “The metaphor of the mule becomes a metaphor for the female condition; the burdens borne are not only those imposed by physical

labor, but by sexist attitudes” (666). This transition results from the attempts of black men to gain their own selfhood from under the crushing feet of the white man, and in an effort to assert their authority, these black men subjugate black women to the role of mule.

Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, gives a more complete background of the term and demonstrates its use in African American literature. Nanny outlines the original negative meaning to Janie when she seeks to persuade her to marry Logan Killicks:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. . .So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (14)

As this mule, the black woman is of the lowest class of human beings (as exemplified by the triple marginalization theory) almost to the point of being a beast of burden. Alice Walker further explains the black woman’s plight in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the *mule* of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry. We have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” and “Mean and Evil Bitches.” Not to mention “Castraters” and “Sapphire’s Mama.” When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. (237)

In this position, they are powerless to change their situation or fight back against oppression—mules have no voice, no ability to speak. Nanny, the character often associated with passive acceptance of this situation, explains her early struggle: “Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow. . . Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they was no pulpit for me” (16). She wants to speak out, but knows that her societal role would not allow her—she has to be submissive to orders from those hold racial or sexual power (white men and women/ black men) and carry her burdens in silence.

Janie first begins to understand the identity society imposed on her when she is a young child. Growing up among white people, she has no reason to consider herself any different from her light skinned playmates: “Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wasn’t white till Ah was around six years old” (8). After she sees herself in a photograph, Janie realizes that she is “colored” (8). Janie also faces ridicule from her black schoolmates because of her white caretakers: “Mis’ Washburn useter dress me up in all de clothes her gran’ chillun didn’t need no mo’ which still wuz better’n whut the rest uh de colored chillun had. . . Dat uster rile Mayrella uh lot. So she would pick at me all de time and put some others up tuh do de same” (9). The children also teased her about her absent parents, saying that “bloodhounds on de trail tuh ketch mah papa for whut he done tuh mah mama” (10). Ten years later, Nanny’s speech, combined with these previous school experiences, outlines the way of the world to Janie.

Her marriage to Logan Killicks perpetuates her mule role. Nanny forcing her against her will to marry him shows her belief that Janie is incapable of making decisions for herself and that her place is to obey blindly what she is told—like a mule incapable of thought and decision-making. Sigrid King, a graduate student at Louisiana State University, states that Logan also treats her as such by calling her “‘LilBit,’ a name which reveals her position of powerless in his

mind.” Likewise Janie refers to her husband as “Mist’ Killicks,” like a slave would speak to her master (688). He expects her to work for him without complaint both in the kitchen and outside—“You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick” (31)—and even goes as far as buying another mule for her to work along side. Although Killicks and Janie are both black, he believes that being a male gives him power over his wife—in this case, Janie’s marginalization is based on sex.

Seeking to escape from Logan and her mule status, Janie runs off with Joe Starks, but soon finds herself in a similar situation. Joe claims that he can provide a much better life for Janie than her current husband because he “wants to make a wife outa [her],” which means she would be “sit[in’] on de front porch” instead of being “behind a plow” (29). However, Joe’s “big voice” does not hold up to its promises—he makes Janie into an object for only him to look at (forces her to tie up her beautiful hair) and one that will work for him (long hours in the store and at home cooking and cleaning). SallyAnn Ferguson, an English professor at North Carolina A&T State University, points out “that men [like Joe] who make women objects of their labor tend to treat them as things bought and owned, not as equal human beings” (189). Besides working her hard, he seeks to take away her voice, which leaves her in an animal-like state of obedience and silence. When they first arrive in Eatonville, the townspeople ask Janie to make a speech, and Joe tells them, “[M]ah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout speech-makin.’ Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (43). Joe’s response also reflects his adherence to the “cult of true womanhood”—he is putting his woman in her place. He also keeps her from participating in the community porch gossip—“Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge” (53). Because of Joe’s treatment, Janie begins to empathize with the mule, who has “done been

worked tuh death; done had his poor disposition ruint wid mistreatment” (56), and identify the plight of the mule with her life. Joe even goes as far as verbally equating her with animals when he says, “Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows” (71). When his attempts to control Janie with his words fail, he tries to beat her into submission—the way a master seeks to control an unruly, stubborn mule. Joe’s treatment of Janie categorizes her as a mule in almost every possible way.

Near the end of her husband’s life, Janie begins a more active quest for her own identity. She realizes that one of the keys to this goal is to regain, or perhaps achieve for the first time, her voice. Deborah Clarke, an English professor and Director of the American Studies Program at Penn State University, writes that “voice has prevailed as the primary medium through which African American writers have asserted identity and humanity. Voice announced that visual difference was only skin deep, that black bodies housed souls that were no different from those residing in white bodies” (599). The first time that Janie really speaks is in response to her husband’s purchase of the mule. She delivers a fine speech that is elegantly presented and which undermines Joe’s authority: “Freein’ dat mule makes uh mighty bug man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, ha 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 dat makes you something lak ah king uh something” (58). She mocks his feeble attempt to bring justice to the world by freeing the mule, and the townspeople respond to her with praise—“Yo’ wife is uh born orator. . .She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts” (58). Her reclamation of a tiny portion of her stolen power brings her, at least temporarily, a new found sense of human worth. This encouragement prompts her to emasculate Joe with her words, and thus gain freedom from him: “You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t

nothin' to it but yo' big voice. . .When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (79). She exposes him for what he really is and finally takes a stand for herself. This reversal of power leaves Joe in the position of the mule until he slowly withers away and dies.

Her acquisition of a voice can also be seen in her participation in the community activity of storytelling. In his article about the use oral narrative in this novel, Klaus Benesch asserts that "ultimate emancipation for her [Janie] means far less to renounce the traditional male-female relationship than to claim active participation in the oral traditions of her environment" (628). The oral tradition is a major function of African-American communities, and the previous denial of her rights makes Janie more acutely aware of the importance of such involvement. Hurston asserts in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that folklore is an essential element of the Negro voice: "So we can say that the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. . .Negro folklore is not a thing of the past . It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use" (1041-5). When Janie is with Tea Cake in the Glades, she begins to sit on the store porch listening to the "big stories" and eventually begins to participate in the dialogue (134). Being able to become an active part of this tradition, and subsequently the community, gives Janie a sense of belonging and humanness. She begins her storytelling by joining in the big lies, and ultimately achieves her voice when she tells her story in the narrative that frames the novel. She understands that even though the town folk of Eatonville say that "she ain't even worth talkin' after," telling her story to at least one person—her friend Phoeby—allows her to share her feeling and express herself artistically (3). Previous to her reclamation of her voice, Janie must have felt like what Alice Walker describes, as "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (233).

Janie achieves a voice not only through her verbal stands against Joe, but through her storytelling, particularly that of her own story.

Tea Cake's treatment of Janie as an equal also allows her to escape mule status. When he first meets her, Tea Cake asks her about herself and banters with her instead of boasting about himself and talking down to her. He also teaches her to play checkers, which gives her confidence in her personhood—"she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice" (96). In the Glades, he teaches her to shoot guns, and even when she becomes a better shot, Tea Cake does not feel threatened. He also not only allows her to participate in the rough community events such as storytelling, dancing, and gambling, but the two hold these events together. Tea Cake, like Logan and Joe, wants her to work, but unlike them, he wants her to work along side him because he enjoys her company: "Janie, Ah gets lonesome out dere all day 'thought yuh. After dis, you betta com git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women—so Ah won't be losin' time comin' home" (133). He also risks his life to protect her during the hurricane, a completely different concept than the false protection offered by her other two husbands. Although clearly not a perfect character, Tea Cake comes as close to Janie's ideal of the pear tree than anyone else will. Susan Meisenhelder explains this concept in her article "False Gods and Black Goddesses in Naylor's *Mama Day* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*":

For Hurston, this image represents the ideal relationship—both sexual and emotional—between women and men. The male bee is not aggressive or rapacious: he gently "sinks" into the blossom, and the female flower is not passive: she "arches to meet the love embrace." It is the marriage of such active



femaleness and gentle masculinity, its fundamental equality, that results in fruit.  
(1441)

This picture is the goal that Janie seeks throughout the novel, beginning with her first awakening when she is sixteen and finally culminating with her relationship with Tea Cake.

Another way that Janie gains freedom from her muleness is by renaming herself. Throughout the novel she has allowed others to have power over her by letting them name her. Nanny calls her “de mule uh de world,” Logan calls her “LilBit,” asserting his prominence over her, and Joe calls her “lil girl-chile” (28) and Mrs. Starks in declaration of his authority over and ownership of her. King writes, “Taking possession of one’s own name and thus claiming sovereignty over one’s self is an act of power” (684). Janie seeks to rename herself and redefine her position by overturning traditional sex and gender roles. She learns male activities when she is with Tea Cake, and after his death becomes autonomous. Kimberly Benson points out that this renaming is not enough:

No particular name can satisfy the energy of the questing self. So long as the questing character seeks a name through a prescribed social role, he or she discovers only limitation, whereas when a character is unnamed, he or she can have limitless designations which disrupt the function of social labeling and deny the applicability of words’ topical function to his or her unfolding experience.  
(qtd. in King 684-5)

Janie’s achievement of this namelessness can be seen in the beginning of the novel—“So the beginning of this was a woman” (1). She remains only a woman, impervious to the ridicule of the town. They seek to define her and name her “Janie Starks,” but she is no longer such (3).

Janie has shed her mule role and oppressive last names to become only Janie, one who is defined by who she is, not by her relationship to a man or her domestic role.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston traces the journey of Janie as she seeks freedom from her predefined role as the “mule uh de world” (14). She overcomes this prevalent stereotype by regaining the voice that was taken from her and achieves a coequal marriage relationship. She renames herself into the unnamable, which makes her untouchable by the oppressing categorization that society seeks to impose upon her. She creates her new identity through a counter discourse that does not adhere to the dominant perception of women. This practice is described by Richard Terdiman as “the present and scandalous trace of an historical potentiality for difference which...inherently situate[s] [itself] as ‘other’ to a dominant discourse which by definition attempts to exclude heterogeneity from the domain of utterance and is thus functionally incapable of even conceiving the possibility of discursive opposition or resistance to it” (11). This new meaning, however, cannot be wholly separated from the original. Elleke Boehmer explains this simultaneous meaning as a double process of cleaving: “a cleaving from, moving away from [previous negative] definitions. . .and in order to effect this, cleaving to, borrowing, taking over, or appropriating the ideological, linguistic, and textual forms of [previous/old negative discourse]” (105-6). The positive meaning of the word, therefore, cannot be fully understood/appreciated apart from its negative meaning.

In her autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou explores both the positive and negative connotations of the term—she includes the motif and in similar spirit adds to it a new positive meaning through signifier erasure. Although the work necessarily singles out young Maya, or Marguerite Johnson, as the protagonist, three other female characters play a central role in her life—her mother Vivian Baxter, her grandmother,

who she calls Momma, and Mrs. Bertha Flowers, her mentor. The reactions of these four black females to their circumstances work together to form a more complete positive image of the mule of the world.

Even when she is a very young child, Maya has an awareness of her place as mule. In her first memory, her poverty evokes shame—when Momma is making her Easter dress, Maya says, “it look[s] like magic” and believes that she will “look like a movie star” only to be faced with the disappointing truth that it is “a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway” (2). She also perceives the color of her skin to be a cause for humiliation: “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (2). Maya goes on to argue that her blackness is all part of a nightmare: “Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (3). Although she explicitly expresses her consciousness of two of the three tiers of her marginalization (race and class), the physical description Maya gives of herself suggests that she has already begun equating beauty (Western society’s conception of beauty) with worth (measure of womanhood). In his article dealing with form and identity, Pierre A. Walker explains, “At that point, Maya entirely separates her sense of self from her sense of race, and this is part of her identity crisis, since she refuses to accept being who she is and hankers after a foreign identity that is a compound of received ideas of white feminine beauty” (95). At the end of this memory, Angelou comments, “If growing up is painful for a Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (4). In this first section, Maya, as well as the reader, is enlightened and shown the black female’s dictated place in the world.

This establishment is reinforced by specific encounters with whites which continue to affirm her mule status. When an incident arises between a black man and a white woman, the “used-to-be sheriff” informs Momma that “some of the boys’ll be coming over,” instead of trying to do something to stop them—clearly crippled Uncle Willie had nothing to do with what happened (17). Not only does he do nothing, but he delivers the message with arrogance: “The used-to-be sheriff sat rakishly astraddle his horse. His nonchalance was meant to convey his authority and power over even dumb animals. How much more capable he would be with Negroes. It went without saying” (17). Here again blacks (and therefore Maya) are equated with animals or mules.

The episode involving the “powhitetrash” children also exemplifies muleness. These children, who are poor and dirty but white, refer to Momma and Uncle Willie, black adults, by their first names and order them around because they believe in their racial superiority: “they threw their orders around the Store like lashes from a cat-o’-nine-tales” (29). Three of such girls even have the impudence to mock Momma by imitating her—“At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum” (30)—and one exposes herself to Momma. Although Maya’s grandmother wins a silent victory, which side of the racial line she is on is glaringly obvious.

In the incident with Dentist Lincoln, white society degrades Maya yet again. During the Depression, this man borrowed money from Momma to keep his business afloat, so naturally she assumed that he would return the favor by fixing her granddaughter’s tooth. However, he disrespects her by making her wait “in the harsh sunlight on the shaky railings of the dentist’s back porch for over an hour,” calling her by her first name, and outright refusing to help (188). He says, “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s,”

which once again declares blacks to be nothing but animals (189). The dentist does not call her a mule but makes it apparent that he values a dog more than a black girl.

Members of her own race, including her parents, also play a part in Maya's oppression. They send her and Bailey off to Alabama to live with their grandmother when she is only three years old—the very people who are supposed to love her unconditionally leave her feeling inadequate. The Christmas presents the children receive from California one year bring sadness and questions of “Why did they send us away?” and “What did we do wrong,” instead of happiness (53). Liliane K. Arensberg explains in her article, “Abandonment by a dead mother is forgivable, but abandonment by a living one evokes a rage so threatening that it must undergo massive repression. . . .Not only is her mother alive, but Maya herself must have been as good as dead during those early years of separation” (n.p.). Even when she is reunited with her parents, they continue to be absent in an emotional if not physical way. When her father comes to visit, he makes fun of Maya saying, “Is Daddy's baby going to fly away?” (55) and “You mean Daddy's baby doesn't want to go to St. Louis to see her mother? She's not going to eat you up, you know” (58), when he is not ignoring her. The second time she sees him her father fails to protect her, dragging her to Mexico where he gets drunk (“I was a poor little girl thing who was caring for my drunken father” [240]) and leaving her with his live-in Delores, who stabs her (I put my arm back to my waist and it brought fresh blood as I pulled it away. I *was* cut” [246]). Maya's father, Bailey Sr., perpetuates her mule status with his indifferent and neglectful treatment.

Likewise, her mother Vivian wraps herself in her own affairs with only fleeting thoughts for her children. In St. Louis, she provided their necessities “even if that meant getting someone else to furnish the provisions,” but often went out at night, leaving Maya and Bailey alone or

with Mr. Freeman (70). When she returned, Vivian would question them about homework and then send them off with “say your prayers and go to bed,” not spending any time with them (71). During one of these times when her mother is away, Mr. Freeman molests Maya, beginning a downward spiral which eventually leads to her rape. This violence and objectification reflect his view of women, particularly black women—that they are subservient and exist for the pleasure of men—which penetrates into Maya’s consciousness. Her rape scars her so deeply that she believes that she is responsible for Mr. Freeman’s death and subsequently remains silent for over a year: “a man was dead because I lied. . . [and] I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. . . I had to stop talking” (86-7). His treatment of her as a subhuman causes her to own this mule role by ceasing the flow of language, one of the very things that separates man from beast.

This work includes not only these negative aspects of the term, but positive ones as well. Mules are strong, intelligent creatures which will not be worked to death, coerced into doing something they do not want to do, or give up. Likewise, the black women in this novel spurn the efforts of both blacks and whites to keep them down—they are capable, as Alice Walker says, of not only toting “the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry,” but succeeding in spite of these burdens (273). As Angelou continues her praise of Momma, setting her up as a kind of ideal for the black woman, she creates a new, black cult of true womanhood, which becomes the standard/goal against which all of the black women in her story are measured. Momma demonstrates these qualities through the virtual independence from men she obtains in the Store: “From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand between two points of fiscal interest and supplied the workers’ needs for a few years. Then she has the Store built in the heart of the Negro area. Over the years it became the center of activities for the town” (6).

Physical strength emanates from her—“I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so” (46). Momma cares for her brother Willie, who was dropped as a child and became a cripple, when no one else will, and for her son’s children. She stands up for what she believes in, not allowing the impudence of white girls or dentists to steal her pride: “Her brown face shone on me. She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn’t completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. . . Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (33). Even when she is outside of her element, Momma adapts to survive, not allowing changes to slow her down—“An old Southern Negro woman who had lived her whole life under the left breast of her community learned to deal with white landlords, Mexican neighbors and Negro strangers. . . She, who had never been more than fifty miles from her birthplace, learned to traverse the maze of Spanish-named streets in that enigma that is Los Angeles” (202-3). Momma therefore embodies all positive connotations of the mule term, which becomes the ideal of this black womanhood.

Vivian, despite her flaws, possesses some of these qualities as well. She is intelligent and full of life—“educated, from a well-known family. . . She laughed all the time and made jokes” (69). On one occasion she wakes her children up in the middle of the night and has a party demonstrating not only her love for life but for her children: “I am giving a party and you are my honored and only guests. . . There was nothing for it but to laugh at our beautiful and wild mother” (205). She also has pride in who she is and the work she does, even if it is gambling—“She told us that she had never cheated anybody. . . She wouldn’t bust suds for anybody nor be anyone’s kitchen bitch. The good Lord gave her a mind and she intended to use it to support her mother and children. She didn’t need to add ‘And have a little fun along the way’” (206). Not

only will she not subject herself to serving as a maid, Vivian will not let the men in her life squelch her independence. Literary critic George E. Kent describes her this way: “She herself is the embodiment of bold aggressiveness and self-reliance. Her philosophy, too, has its brief maxims, involving the acceptance of the chaos swirling through and around ‘protective’ institutions and meeting it with an on-topsmanship derived from the tough and alert self” (n. pag.). Survival instinct and healthy pride characterize Vivian Baxter, thus making her an example of the Signified mule.

Mrs. Flowers is another woman who greatly impacted Maya’s life. For Maya, “Mrs. Bertha Flowers was one of the first gentlewomen [she had] ever known. . .[and is] the measure of what a human being can be” (93-4). She is wealthy and elegant, earning herself the title of “Mrs.” that black women rarely possess. Mrs. Flowers, like Momma, captures the essence of this new black cult of true womanhood. Maya brings them together saying, “they were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education” (94). However, unlike Momma, Mrs. Flowers seeks to understand and motivate Maya out of her “old biscuit” state and throws her a “life line” (93). Maya sees Mrs. Flowers as an ideal, someone she wishes to be. Therefore, when Mrs. Flowers takes Maya under her wing, accepting her and loving her for just being herself (“I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson” [101]), Maya takes to heart her advice to use her voice. Mrs. Flowers exhibits strength and confidence in her identity and endeavors to impart her success to others.

Although Maya is presented with all of the negative denotations of “the mule of the world,” and the tripartite forces try to quench her livelihood in her early years, by the end of the novel momentous steps have been taken toward her victory over them—she does not allow the rape and other adversities to destroy her. Her earliest achievements begin as she reclaims her



voice under the guidance and admonition of Mrs. Flowers: ““No one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals.’ This was a totally new idea to me, and I would need to think about it” (98). She puts this lesson into practice in the following chapter, while working in the home of a wealthy white woman, Mrs. Cullinan, who treats her black employees as slaves, renaming them like she would her property—she calls her cook Glory even though her name is Hallelujah. Maya, because of Mrs. Flowers’ influence, proceeds to stand up against Mrs. Cullinan, who will not dignify her by using her correct name—“When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream, “Mary!” I picked up the casserole dish and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor. . .Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn’t Mary” (111). She also reads constantly and does well in school, which is key to success for anyone, especially the African American. Maya again demonstrates her strength and resilience when she drives her drunken father out of Mexico—she knows that something terrible could happen if she does not take control. Sidonie Ann Smith states that “for the first time, Maya finds herself in control of her fate. Such total control contrasts vividly to her earlier recognition in Stamps that she as a Negro had no control over her fate. Here she is alone with that fate. And although the drive culminates in an accident, she triumphs” (368). Probably her most telling conquest comes when she gains a job as a streetcar driver after surmounting numerous obstacles. Maya meets immediate resistance and, instead of shrugging off her dream, fights back:

The miserable encounter had nothing to do with me, the me of me, any more than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The

secretary. . .[was] a fellow victim of the same puppeteer. . .All lies, all comfortable lies. The receptionist was not innocent and neither was I. The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white. . .My mind shouted. . .I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD. (267-8)

This stubborn determination for change and survival mirrors that of a mule refusing to move one more inch for a cruel master. Her final act of liberation can be seen in the adult Maya who is writing her story years later. Angelou's portrayal of the "mule of the world" motif adds to Hurston's definition of the term "mule" by including more positive dimensions that represent strength of body and spirit, intelligence, determination and acceptance.

Both of these authors have taken it upon themselves to change the perception of the African-American woman by overturning the negative "mule" motif. Zora Neale Hurston uses the self-actualization of Janie to demonstrate that freedom from this stereotype is possible. Maya Angelou takes this process of overcoming one step further by reversing the negative meaning and appropriating a new positive meaning. These efforts for social change do not detract from the works of the authors but instead enhance the appeal of their stories and make strides to change cultural perception by first changing, or at least bringing an awareness to, the minds of African-American women. Once this awareness is made, steps toward the enlightenment of mainstream culture can be made.

Hurston's and Angelou's employment of Gates's Theory of Signification in these two works attempts to redefine the misconceived identity of the African-American woman. This strategy attacks the heart of the issue by exerting the power of the signifier over the signified

(deleting old meaning of mule of the world and replacing it with their own). By focusing their efforts on the pervasive mule motif, these two authors strike at one of the most prevalent societal ideas about the black female at the level of language (the dictator of meaning). Their works also serve as a kind of roadmap for African-American women as they journey to gain a voice in society and create a new identity or concept of black womanhood.

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