

# Critical Animal Studies (CAS) Applied to the Mule: Nostalgic Loss and Futile Recovery in Two Contemporary Southern U.S. Stories

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**Abstract** Fiction about animals has often been under renewed examination over the past two decades using new theories which break from traditional hierarchical notions of the superiority of humans as well as provide new insights regarding the relationship between humans and animals. No longer are animals to be understood merely as literary symbols in the conventional tradition. An effort over the last two decades has come about to represent the thoughts, attitudes and perspectives of animals, reflecting demands for a more humane treatment of animals. Philosophers of ethics reconsider the moral justification of using animals like machines, beasts of burden or even as food; this new area of study is known as Critical Animal Studies (CAS) and has wide applications. The need to reconsider human – nonhuman animal relations (specifically the mule and horse) is at the center of this article which examines two short stories focussing on mules in recent Southern U.S. publications. In both stories, retired Southern men face family conflicts and reflect on their lives, responding with the nuanced understanding of the benefit of the presence of mules near the end of their lives.

**Keywords** Critical Animal Studies (CAS), Human-animal relations, Animals in American fiction, American short stories, Mule, Aging, Southern U.S. literature, Brad Vice, Clint McCown

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the influence of animals on the lives of humans has become a focus of scholars in many branches of the social sciences and humanities. In recent studies, the nature of animal consciousness, the abilities of animals to learn skills, feel emotions and communicate through their own languages all have borne fruit in increasing our understanding of animal lives and our responsibility for animal welfare in scores of scholarly books and articles. The morality of exploiting animals as property for labor, entertainment in carnivals or zoos, or as food has come into question by philosophers of ethics, giving greater rigor to the animal rights movement's demand for new or updated laws for the protection of nonhuman animals. Archeologists have shown that the history of man's rumination about animals long precedes writing. As long as man has painted or written, animals have been a major source of artistic imagination which is evident in all of the earliest societies

that left behind artifacts or writings. In ancient cultures, animals have frequently represented divinities. In literary fiction, animals have usually symbolized some facet of the human personality or human frailty or have even attempted to represent human-animal relations. It is the latter example, i.e., literary expression specifically regarding a beast of burden that I will focus on in this paper.

The mule, a hybrid of a mare and a jackass, usually bred and domesticated for farm work or occasionally for transportation in rural areas, has been a subject of literary imagination since Homer's *Odyssey* when the beautiful Princess Nausikaa drives a team of magnificent mules on the island of Scheria (in Book VI). Three of the victory odes by the ancient Greek poet Pindar of Thebes (522-433 BC) celebrate the victories of two champions, Psaumis of Camarina and Hagesias of Syracuse. Both men won chariots races pulled by mules in different Panhellenic Olympic Games. The Bible includes many animal stories, including a talking she-donkey owned by Balaam with considerable implications for exegeses of Old Testament interpretation (Way 2009: 48-51; Stone 2017: 109-115), part of which includes the donkey's and mule's amazingly consistent characteristic of patience with the human master who appears less wise than his beast of burden. Mules in the Bible were presented as prestigious animals of transport, ridden by the royal court and aristocracy (for example David, Solomon and Absalom). In an example of this characteristic written a little more than a century and a half ago, this time a short story by the French author Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897), "La mule de Pape" ("The Pope's Mule," published in 1866) is set in papal Avignon in the 14th century. A deceptive servant of the pope repeatedly mistreats the pope's majestic mule. The mule is revealed to be amazingly patient during the numerous years of abuse. At the end, the mule waits seven years before exacting unimpeachable revenge.

Similar to the aforementioned French story, mules have been a source of comic relief in fiction. Following the Biblical example, as Heather McKay notes, the donkey "is made a carnivalesque figure that suddenly has voice, memory, and familiarity with her 'owner' and we treat the story as we would any story in which animals talk – as a fable" (McKay 2002: 138-139). In the United States, mules have generally replaced the donkey as a stock part of fiction since the tall tales of Southwest Humor in the early nineteenth century (Cohen and Dillingham, 1975) which in the main consisted in the

frontier humor of exaggeration. The Biblical talking donkey (Num. 22:28-30) has been a source for intertextual comic representations of the donkey-horse-mule plantation discussing their “conflicts” on the plantation in African American Vernacular English represented in, for instance, *The Tales of Uncle Remus* collection, whereby trickster equines appear more clever than humans. Blacks have often been linked with mules, as they most often worked with them on cotton and sugar plantations, although Southern fiction writers frequently include mules merely for local color. Artists likewise linked the animals and black people for a similar effect, as the English novelist and artist William Makepeace Thackeray noted during a visit to the United States in 1856: “[i]t would be good sport and practice to stop here for a month and draw negroes. Negroes and horses – negroes and mules – Negro boys – old women etc. They are endlessly picturesque” (Thackeray 1946: 258). In the past century the Alabama-born African American artist Bill Traylor (1853-1949) who was born into slavery, depicted mules among other animals and humans in modern folk art which has been the center of considerable attention in the art world (Umberger 2018).

Southern short fiction has been analyzed regarding the complex role of the mule and their often brutal exploitation by humans in short stories such as Charles W. Chesnutt’s “The Conjuror’s Revenge” (Wonham, 1998; Koy 2005) and William Faulkner’s “Mule in the Yard” (Matthiessen 1941; Cooley 1970; Ferguson 1991; Matthews 1992). In the early novel *Santoris* (1929), William Faulkner defines the mule’s condition in the South as rather dreadful, akin to an outcast or the modern alienated Other:

Father and mother he does not resemble, sons and daughters he will never have; vindictive and patient (it is a known fact that he will labor ten years willingly and patiently for you, for the privilege of kicking you once); solitary but without pride, self-sufficient but without vanity; his voice is his own derision. Outcast and pariah, he has neither friend, wife, mistress, nor sweetheart; celibate, he is unscarred, possesses neither pillar nor desert cave, he is not assaulted by temptations nor flagellated by dreams nor assuaged by vision; faith hope and charity are not his (Faulkner 1974: 226).

While the mule is without pride and vanity, in the same paragraph in *Santoris* Faulkner asserts that the mule has “taught [the South] pride again through humility” (Faulkner 1974: 226). These historical and cultural characterizations of the hybrid equine may be the most complimentary traits Faulkner has ever bestowed upon any living creature in the South.

Hollywood has gotten into the act in retelling comic situations with the mule with a variety of entertaining films featuring talking equines: the cynical but clever trickster mule in “Francis the Talking Mule,” a six-film series starring Donald O’Connor and Mickey Rooney from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, “Gus the Mule” (1976), a football film starring Ed Asner whose mule imported from the Balkans helps a professional football team suddenly win (made possible because football rules did not exclude nonhuman members of a football team), and the “Shrek” film series, replacing the mule with an amusing trickster singing and dancing donkey character (voice by Eddie Murphy) who mates with a female dragon to produce flying hybrids named “dronkeys.” These cinematic forms of entertainment attest to the sustained popularity of these chattering beasts.

While mules have been a traditional source for humor as well as serious reflection particularly regarding their role on the plantation in the rural South (as well as in Western genre fiction), in the two contemporary short stories to be explored below, I attempt to draw

conclusions regarding how the authors not only represent the post-plantation mule but actually attempt to advance the cause of the mule and his place in our contemporary world of tractors and other motorized vehicles. As Claude Lévi-Strauss noted, animals are not merely “good to eat” but are also “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89), and in these stories, mules aid old men to think hard about their own fate. Jacques Derrida follows Lévi-Strauss up by questioning humans and nonhumans in Western thought in a talk in 1997, later published as *L’Animal que donc je suis* – in English rendered as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), arguing that the history of philosophy from the beginning separates humans from all other animals by attributing numerous capacities only to humans (e.g., language, culture, mourning, a relationship to death) but denying them to animals. Derrida does not underscore the similarities between humans and other animals but highlights heterogeneities notable in both. Derrida undermines long-standing assumptions about ontological distinctions between human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom among his later works in philosophy. With regard to equines, and mules in particular, common aspects as well as the human-mule relationship will be the focus of this paper, noting how the mule marks psychological and cultural aspects among older Southern male humans idealizing conservative pastoral values.

## 2. CLINT McCOWN’S “MULE COLLECTOR” (1993)

Clint McCown, a Tennessee-born and Alabama-raised novelist and short story writer, serves as professor of creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University. His story “Mule Collector” won the Wallace Stegner Prize and was later published in his story collection *The Member-Guest* (1994). Set in the 1980s, it comi-tragically narrates an aging Southern widower resisting his inevitable decline of faculties as well as a multitude of alienating aspects of modernity by buying and devotedly maintaining half a dozen mules in his yard, plainly for nostalgic purposes. The story reflects the difficult final transition that Southern farmers traditionally using mules experienced, as Ellenberg describes:

The story of the mule’s passage through southern history reflects the region’s passage from a slave society into tenancy and sharecropping, and then into an era characterized by rapidly expanding urban and suburban areas, capital-intensive agribusinesses, and a depopulated countryside (Ellenberg 2007: 154).

In McCown’s story, unreliable narrators bring multiple perspectives on how the modern South might be understood: the old man ponders over the changes of values in the twentieth century while his fifty-year-old son appears to be utterly unaware of history at all, not even recognizing any cultural or historical distinctions connected with being a Southerner. McCown portrays old Glen L. Hanshaw affectionately and ambivalently. The elderly man resides in a modern air-conditioned house “to recover from the rigors of playing golf and tending to his mules” (McCown 1993: 142). Contrasting the more familiar setting of Southern rural poverty where mules are concerned, “[h]e enjoyed being uncomfortably cold on the hottest day of the year. That’s what being rich was all about” (McCown 1993: 142). Brooding over his childhood, “Glen L.” recalls in some detail spending his youth plowing fields behind huge drays. Later he cleverly makes a millionaire out of himself by selling the most decadent automobile of transportation, the Cadillac, a vehicle which helped not only to completely eliminate horses as well as his beloved mules as means of transportation in the mid and latter half of the 20th century, but brought about extreme comfort and ease in transport as well.

Like many elderly people suffering from early signs of dementia, Glen's long-term memory is very sharp but he has frequent breakdowns of short-term memory, failing momentarily to recall the name of a son visiting him over the weekend, his only family member left alive. He does recall his other, more talented son Bill, who committed suicide. He reckons, the visiting son then must be Harold, a lamentable, obsolete, fifty-year-old bachelor who rather inadequately manages his father's car dealership and is regarded by his father as an appallingly uncharismatic salesman, "his mouth now hanging open like a clubbed fish" (McCown 1993: 144).

He informs Harold that he had just coated his patio walls with sugar (as he does every afternoon) as a treat for his darling mules who surround the back of his house licking the walls, a practice Harold regards as "grotesque" and as a key sign of his father's ever-escalating senility. Both father and son are narcissistic and can hardly stand each other.

"Pretty soon you won't see mules at all except in zoos," Glen L. said, pushing himself up from his chair. There's no call for them anymore. It's all tractors now." Harold rose quickly and steadied his father by the elbow, then caught the glass of tea as it slid from the aluminum armrest. Glen L. looked at the rescued drink in Harold's hand, then up at his son's sad eyes, and felt things going wrong inside (McCown 1993: 150).

From Glen's perspective, Harold thinks his old man is a useless fool and that he is beginning to treat him like a mule which has been replaced and likewise made obsolete. Yet the father wishes things to be reversed: in anger he tries but fails to whip his son like a mule, sensing that Harold wanted to put his father away in some home for the feeble-minded. Glen senses the need to keep, maintain and appreciate the creatures that have likewise had their time and purpose in the past but have outlived both; mules ameliorate old age. McCown depicts an unusual form of "animal consumerism" among animal collectors: Glen's mules are purchased, collected and tended to for the sheer pleasure of one man. His collection of a half dozen mules freely roam around the very large garden located near a golf course, and they are cared for dotingly by Glen alone, not to be used for profit or capitalist consideration but solely as his companions. They may be caressed and kissed, but never whipped. Glen intends to buy yet another mule to add to his collection, but when Harold vigorously discourages and challenges his designs, Glen loses his temper, identifying himself with the obsolete and unwanted mules:

[...] he'd be damned if he'd let a son of his tell him what to do with his life. Maybe Emily would've put up with that kind of disrespect, letting her precious boys say and do whatever the hell they wanted – but not him. No, by God, no son could talk like that and get away with it – that was the one thing he learned from his own father [...] He'd show this little shit which one of them was boss (McCown 1993: 154).

The old man's rage eventually subsides and in its place his conflicted highly-emotional disposition resettles into a poignant gloom as he reconsiders despondently his current lot in life:

This wasn't the view he'd expected his life to come to. He expected to pass out his days sitting on the patio with Emily, the two of them watching their grandkids tear across the neatly trimmed lawn. He'd even imagined putting in a pool for days like this. But now he was an old man with brittle bones, and the lawn was a ruin, cut to pieces by the sharp trampling of hooves. There was no pool, there were no grandkids, there was no Emily. Harold was his only

remnant. He might as well have been a mule himself, for all he'd leave behind him in the world. (McCown 1993: 157).

The tension is concluded somewhat when he unintentionally but sympathetically remarks on how similar his son actually looks to himself: "You need to take better care of yourself, Harold [...] You look like death on a shingle" (McCown 1993: 156). The story closes in a choir of braying mules in the backyard, a sound thoroughly adored by Glen, a positive voice given to the mules understood as expressing glee:

They were all singing now, all six of them, and they'd never been in finer form. Their clamor echoed through the porch, raw-edged and harsh, but still oddly tuneful, a sassy chorus crowding out the air. It was the most complicated sound Glen L. could imagine – far more complicated than the chugging of an engine, more complicated even than salvaging lost words. In some ways it was ugly, like a hopeless pain worming between the ribs (McCown 1993: 159).

In this uncomplicated plot, McCown's "Mule Collector" presents a rare setting of modern suburban opulence with mules aiding the main character to recall his uncomfortable and difficult yet highly appreciated pre-industrial youth as well as the robust manliness required to plow fields behind mules on the farm. In his old age, Glen unconditionally loves every aspect of this animal, including their habitual loud braying, as their audible presence brings him comfort. Like numerous other characters of southern fiction, Glen L. Hanshaw shows fealty and even identifies with the mule's unique sense of being impractical as a response to his own hoary life of incoherence, discontinuity and meaninglessness. Incapable of understanding his father's nostalgia, it is impossible for Harold Hanshaw to comprehend what his father ruminates of the past because of Harold's life of comparable ease. This incomprehension creates a considerable psychological rift between these two generations of Southerners. While Glen had undoubtedly thrived in the new technologically-dominating world of the automobile, in the discontent of his old age he reflects pessimistically on what has come out of it. He nostalgically longs for the old enchanted simple world when he was a resilient young male and could consequently better control his circumstances instead of losing nearly all his personal weight and authority. While the hybrid nature of the mule never comes into play in McCown's character's anthropocentric identification with his mules, the ultimate sensation of the sterility of his life certainly does. The conclusion of what this New South he helped build ultimately means to him is the death of cherished old traditions as embodied in the mule. As Glen figures, a few more generations of humans in the South will hardly be cognizant of the mule having ever existed except perhaps in a zoo.

### 3. BRAD VICE'S "MULE" (2005)

Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and approximately two decades younger than McCown, Brad Vice was educated at the Universities of Alabama, Tennessee and Cincinnati, and has been teaching English at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (Czech Republic) for over a decade. His story collection *The Bear Bryant Funeral Train* (2007) contains a superb mule story, first published in Washington and Lee University's *Shenandoah* (2005). Like McCown's story, it concerns an older man, in Vice's plot a retired teacher named Owen O'Shields. He reminisces of his earlier days in the late 1940s and 1950s when he worked the cotton farm behind a plow pulled by mules. Set near Tuscaloosa where the author was raised, the protagonist's rough first-hand experience with a new horse linked with his fond old memories of plowing with mules

interweaves in the plot a rather hostile dispute with his wife Sue regarding his step-daughter's mare. It is only with Mr. Amos, the black school janitor, that Owen O'Shields hits it off with their banter of common consideration about the natural superiority of mules over the overrated horse:

Owen knew everything there was to know about mules. Often as an adult, trapped in the air-conditioned nightmare of his office, he had wished for a pair of mules and forty acres of terraced topsoil to plow. Strangely enough, mules had more horsensense than horses and were usually less stubborn, certainly less flighty [...] (Vice 2007: 169).

Earlier in the story Owen anthropomorphically links the overly-aggressive new stallion his wife purchased with her late, wild and rude but financially successful former husband: "The new stud was probably the son of a bitch's reincarnation come back to claim everything he'd purchased in death" (Vice 2007: 168). Spencer Bonny, the late first husband who had held up a school lunchroom lady with a cap gun, was "unruly and wild as a cartoon cowboy" (Vice 2007: 166-7). The stallion is likewise so difficult to manage that its intended mating with Owen's teenage step-daughter's mare is labelled by Owen as tantamount to rape; he clearly fears for the well-being of his step-daughter's friendly blood bay mare. He even feels he is put upon, and senses utter hatred and even domination by this stallion:

"Did the stud come today?"

Owen felt a tic of jealousy move through his body. He hoped it did not register in his face. "Oh yeah. He's there, running around like he owns the place."

The new horse had arrived at the stables only a few hours before [...] Within the aquiline skull, behind the long, fine lashes, the stud's roving eyes fixed upon everything about him, whether living or dead, with a suspicion that bordered on hate. When he looked at Owen, Owen could feel the hate radiating off the brute like heat from a stove eye. (Vice 2007: 158-9)

Between the two authors under study, Brad Vice comes much closer to allowing an animal to express himself, in this case a horse. As Veronika Rychlá points out, "[a]lthough the gap between animals in reality and animals in narratives may seem unbridgeable, it is the role of art to challenge such obstacles" and allow the animal to offer its own nonhuman perspective (Rychlá 2016: 71), as may be witnessed in *Black Beauty* (1877) or *Watership Down* (1972) by Richard Adams. The hatred is clearly expressed in nonhuman form by the stallion, and Owen, who knows his animals, fears future calamitous consequences. Nevertheless, Owen's wife Sue, who works for the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Department, knows precisely what she desires: like her first husband, Sue prefers a rough and wild stallion. When Amber's mare bares a foal, it shall be a strong and spirited one with this stallion, making the near-uncontrollable characteristic of the unruly stallion all the more alluring to Sue: "He's goddamn gorgeous is what he is," Sue responds to Owen's doubts about the untamed beast (Vice 2007: 160). The stud is a feast for her senses. She clearly finds the equine power, broad smooth chest and rippling leg muscles very attractive. These strongly masculine traits of the stud have an obvious sex appeal to Sue, and Owen's reaction echoes the forbidding Biblical metaphor: "They were well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife" (Jer. 5:8). Like this passage from Jeremiah, the stallion's natural drive to produce offspring is cast in a judgmentally negative light by Owen. He views the mating of the stud as a metaphor for human romantic pursuit. Sue on the other hand sees

the new stud as both a metaphor and medium for navigating power and influence over her family. Unlike this stud but like a mule, Owen will not have any children, for he married late, and his wife is a widow of a certain age.

Sexually linking his unassuming step-daughter Amber to her young mare, Owen's fears allude to a fading domestic world of a parent in fear of a young woman's budding sexuality and his genuine sense of paternal duty to protect her, even if his wife admonishes him, saying that Amber is not his daughter to safeguard. While visiting the high school, he becomes aware of the male high school students, a "pack of love-added hounds" who follow his attractive step-daughter around:

Owen was glad his stepdaughter, tall and statuesque like her mother, was not one of those ninety-eight-pound pixie girls [...] he could feel the ample weight of his step-daughter's breasts pressing into his chest and it embarrassed him that he noticed (Vice 2007: 158).

Behaving like Goneril initially did toward her "milky" husband the Duke of Albany for being too weak-willed in *King Lear*, Owen senses that he is less desired by his wife for his words of caution and pursuit of a stud with more restraint. Sue completely ridicules his warnings of the dangers of the hate-filled stallion, so he devises a simple but transgressive plan: to purchase a mule for himself. When he returns back to the family ranch, he spies on his wife Sue and step-daughter Amber Bonny:

As Owen peered inside, he saw both Amber and Sue standing on either side of the stud. His ears drooped in a sleepy manner; his wet, languid body was still and calm as the women's hands stroked and caressed his neck with their curry combs [...] His entire life he had waited for a family who would love him for his slow and steady ways, and now he had come back home to find them worshipping at the foot of a dangerous idol (Vice 2007: 174).

The affection for the stud which Amber and Sue Owen demonstrate powerfully and unexpectedly with Owen who is incensed: he suddenly and irrationally wishes terrible pain, suffering and even death on the women who he feels have callously betrayed him. His hatred is shown to at least match that of the stallion's, and perhaps like the wild stallion, momentarily Owen aims to perpetrate physical harm on those he hates. Yet the story ultimately concludes with "the mule in him" preventing Owen from lashing out or causing the stud to endanger his wife or step-daughter. The only question left open by the author Brad Vice is whether Owen will retreat in ignominy – in exile from his family – in order to be with his newly-bought mule.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

While the majority of realistic writing regarding mules is read through humans and from their perspectives and therefore focus most often around their use, training or labor exploitation, the two short stories by McCown and Vice reflect an appreciation of mules as companions who bring delight rather than as mere tools or beasts of burden. When mules were replaced by machines (cars, trucks and tractors), they disappeared very suddenly by the mid-twentieth century, to the surprise of many Southerners, as shown near the beginning of John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) where a character named "Muley Graves" tells Tom Joad and Rev. Jim Casey that everyone had been "tractorin' off" their land (Steinbeck 1976: 59). As one scholar puts it in his study *Mule South to Tractor South*, "[m]ules simply appeared too useful in southern agriculture to be supplanted by machines" (Ellenberg 2013: 100).

Yet though machines were more efficient, many humans longed for their workmates and regretted not only the change in their work patterns but longed for the mules as companions, well beyond their instrumental value. As one writer in an agriculture publication wrote in 1958, "This seems certain: The mule may be fading from the Southern farm scene, but he is not losing his place in the hearts of readers" (Anon, 1958: 24). The barn has been described as an entrancing place for young Southern boys to learn how to become a muleteer. As Georgia-born novelist Harry Crews points out, mule barns were male-dominated sphere of a rural setting:

[There] were never any women at the mule barn. This was the place of fathers and brothers and uncles, a quintessentially male world, and for that very reason a place that was almost unbearably pleasant for a young boy who, although he did not know it, was learning the ways of manhood" (Crews 1987: 22).

Like McCown's character Glen Hanshaw, Vice's protagonist Owen O'Shields notes how he is perceived by his family and former colleagues to be as little benefit or use, and they are accordingly emotionally hurt. For the old men in these stories, questions of character and human-animal conduct prevail before other considerations. Both men respond preternaturally at an old age to mules to recover their personal sense of identity and virile manhood which they realize is ebbing away with mental or physical decline and even death approaching. Finally, in a burst of rage, both protagonists consider perpetrating violence to their respective family members they come to despise when they perceive themselves being disrespected. In the case of Owen O'Shields, the sexual nature of the perceived put down is most inappositely perpetrated by the two significant women in his life, and he experiences such an intensity of jealousy that this former high school teacher and vice principal is prepared to become inhumane. In the end, mules are the basis for both protagonists to exercise restraint from violent outbursts as well as nostalgia for a lifestyle forever lost. In both stories mules bring relief to these tension-filled Southerners. Ultimately, mules restore their humanity, expressing a pathos that emotionally links man with mule.

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