Critics may not have paid sufficient attention to Gaines’s people, as distinct from his characterizations. We may need to determine more precisely (to risk a cliché) who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed, for it is their collective fate or destiny as people, as representative humanity, that seems to concern Gaines most and delineates the broader socio-political contours of his fiction.

Gaines’s milieu is south Louisiana, and although its population has become diverse over the years, the region is somewhat distinct, culturally, by virtue of its French legacy. The people are white, the landowning upper class and the Cajun lower class, both of French descent; and black, distinguished by Gaines as Negro (those of apparently unmixed African strain, usually protestant—Baptist¹) and, following local custom, Creole (those of apparent French and African extraction and Catholic). Denizens of an agrarian society having roots in chattel slavery, they interact in Gaines’s fiction according to class, and racial and cultural conflicts and distinctions. Typical of the whites are Marshall Hebert the plantation owner and Sidney Bonbon his Cajun overseer, who may be seen as the Gainesian counterparts of William Faulkner’s aristocratic Sartorises and parvenu Snopeses.² The parvenu Cajuns are inheriting and rapaciously spoiling the land with their infernal new tractors. Agents of destiny, they are historio-mythically associated with the Northern industrial interests that, in the myth of the Old South, laid waste the South’s old feudal society and traditions.

Gaines has a rare thematic opportunity in the Creole, the counterpart of the mulatto in American literature generally, usually exploited as the “tragic mulatto.” Rare in that unlike the mulatto, who exists in scattered isolation throughout the black community, the Creoles, by virtue of what has been attributed to the comparatively relaxed sexual attitudes of the early French as compared with the Anglo-Saxons, are present in greater numbers, often sufficient to constitute a community, usually cemented by their common religion. The Creoles are thus capable of asserting

¹ Baptist
² Snopeses
a social and cultural independence from blacks. The mulatto’s anguish, his “tragedy” according to the literary stereotype, derives from his being neither white nor black, neither “eagle” nor “crow,” in a society in which the difference is crucial, particularly for the isolated individual. Because of his known black ancestry, his “one drop of black blood,” the mulatto or Creole is for all purposes black. However, as depicted in literature and drama by whites, the tragicness of this figure pertains not to blacks but to whites, in whom the requisite tragic emotions of pity and fear arise, as Catherine Juanita Starke explains in what is perhaps the best book to date on the subject, because of the figure’s “observable” whiteness.3

Gaines does not ignore this traditionl thematic possibilty in the Creole. He seizes the opportunity to universalize its appeal, undermining the stereotype through irony, as does James Weldon Johnson in his novel The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), rendering it more as archetype. To this end, Gaines develops in depth a character such as the infernally proud and tragic Creole Raoul in his first novel, Catherine Carmier, thus sharpening our insight into a human situation the peculiar complexity of which has been slighted by mainstream American writers.4 Simultaneously, Gaines criticizes the Creole’s claim, in many instances, to racial and cultural superiority to the Negroes, as seen in Raoul’s opposition to his daughter Catherine’s involvement with Jackson Bradley, a Negro, or in Raoul’s deliberate alienation of his wife Della for giving birth, extramaritally, to a dark-skinned child, the boy Mark, who was killed “accidentally” while cutting trees with Raoul. (Raoul’s response is primarily to the color of the child and not to the extramarital conception.) Further, Gaines presents the Creole as a metaphor of the plight of Afro-Americans generally, including the undermining disunity that exists within the black community. In establishing the metaphor, Gaines is assisted by the existential fact that the Creole’s very existence bespeaks both a literal and a figurative “sexploitation” of the black people.

The metaphorical aspect of Raoul’s portrayal is apparent in his ironic, tragic, yet pathetically futile, struggle as the last of the blacks holding out against the land-gobbling Cajuns and their tractors. The struggle is ironic in that in his conflict with the Cajuns Raoul ignores his blackness, his common plight with his darker-skinned, less caucasoid-featured brothers and sisters, persisting in his identification, racially and culturally, with his nemesis. It is ironic, also, and more importantly, because in his ambition, Raoul is in socio-economic and perhaps in cultural terms an
over-reacher, while being within his rights as a human being. And herein lies the essence of his truly tragic dimension: like his classical model, he falls from a high place, being in his case (as in the case, among twentieth-century examples, of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman) his own, hubristic estimation of himself. In this, he is the truly tragic mulatto, but individualized to the point of universality, and abrogative of the literary stereotype.

Given the persistence of the Old South code positing the inherent inferiority of blacks, and, in Catherine Juanita Starke’s words, “the ritual of non-reciprocal social interaction, instituted during slavery and maintained tenaciously since emancipation,” Raoul’s defiance is hopeless, his “trying to stand when all odds were against him,” as Jackson Bradley, the novel’s main character, observes, while at the same time noting the heroism of Raoul’s stance and recognizing a spiritual kinship between them. It is “Raoul alone—Raoul and his land, his field,” the oracular Mme. Bayonne, Jackson’s confidante, reveals, indicating Raoul’s self-imposed isolation from his fellow humans, embracing the land as a kind of surrogate humanity, breaking, in Hawthornian terms, the Great Chain of Humanity (CC 117). Raoul himself realizes the futility of his dogged resistance (but this is all he realizes), for as he tells Catherine, “sooner or later they [the Cajuns] were going to take over,” but “He was going to give them hell before their tractors plowed dirt in his face” (CC 134). Thus his defiance is personal, motivated by pride. It does not spring from any sense of community that might negate its futility, from any recognition of the racially based socio-economic realities that apply to Negroes and Creoles alike. “He would not call for help to black or white” (CC 150). And again, Mme. Bayonne, oracular and prophetic: “He was put here by the white and the black man alike. The white man will not let Raoul compete with him because of that drop of Negro blood, and at the same time he has put the Negro in such a position that Raoul would rather die than compete with him” (CC 117). This calls to mind the mulatto protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s novel, mentioned earlier, who persisted in living as a white man because of his shame at being included among a people who permitted themselves to be lynched.

The dire consequences of Raoul’s abdication of his humanity is underscored by Gaines’s ascribing to him attributes of the Faustian over-reacher. For in his failure to regard his human responsibility to others, Raoul is a satanic figure who creates infernal conditions for himself and his family; yet, he is not without a certain appeal (see, for example, the scene of Raoul and Catherine in the corn field, CC 152-154), and in this he satisfies one criterion of the
Aristotelian tragic hero, that which requires the character’s possession of sufficient good qualities to preclude a portrayal of total depravity, undeserving of pity. We perceive Raoul’s satanism in touches of characterization artfully placed, including the corn field scene cited above, paradoxically, but particularly from the general impression given, mainly through imagery, of Raoul’s household (CC 42ff), whose kitchen, Catherine’s domain now that her mother Della is displaced, always seems “extremely hot.” Raoul’s estranged second daughter Lillian, taken from her mother Della as a child to be reared by relatives in New Orleans (an aspect of Raoul’s inhuman punishment of Della for bearing the dark-skinned Mark), brings the insight of an outsider’s perspective to a familiar family situation. While home on one of her reluctant visits, Lillian inquires of Catherine, whose relationship with her father has Electra overtones, “When was the last time you killed a snake?”

Also involved in Raoul’s portrayal is the recurrent theme of determinism found in Gaines’s works, at times identified with fate or destiny, and providence, and applicable to the characters collectively as well as individually. Raoul, Mme. Bayonne reminds us, “did not choose his position. He did not choose that house up there behind those oak and pecan trees. He is only carrying out something that was cut out for him in the beginning. He has no control over it. He was not put there by Robert [his father], nor by his grandfather. He was put there by the white and the black man alike” (CC 116-117). Thus it becomes clearer how, at one level, Raoul symbolizes not only the predicament of black people but of the nation as well, as it must accommodate the convergence of Africa and Europe within it. We perceive in Gaines’s orchestration of the theme of determinism a curious, yet apparently effective, melding of the determinism of naturalistic fiction, the classical concept of fate, and Christian providence with its concomitant datum of human responsibility. The overall effect is an indefiniteness that is in keeping with Gaines’s frequent use of ambiguity, including his apparent reluctance to employ absolute racial designations. Nothing is absolute, final; all value lies in process, in the potentiality of process to produce viable human options—or, in religious terms, good seems to be Gaines’s position. The emblem of the weather-faded military cap in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman comes to mind. The cap hangs on a cross ambiguously marking the mass grave Jane Pittman recalls coming upon as a young girl at the end of the Civil War. It establishes an indefiniteness as to the allegiance of the recently buried men, Union blue or Confederate gray. “The weather
had changed the color of the cap so much,” Jane says, “you couldn’t tell if it belong to a Yankee or Secesh” (JP 46). As authorial myth, part of Gaines’s own mythmaking, the mass grave is a common burial or erasure of the past that is essential to forming a tabula rasa of hope, in anticipation of the future not merely of and from a particular day at the war’s end, in the realm of history’s actuality, but of the future, as well, of the inexhaustive present, in the realm of history’s myth, continual and potentially productive of good in the existential domain of human possibility. This gives a measure of Gaines’s humanistic philosophy. According to Jim Kelly in Of Love and Dust, God created man as a free and responsible agent but man creates “the situation” (LD 142). Raoul is typical of Gaines’s characters who abuse this freedom in their failure to assume the requisite responsibility for creating adequate human situations. Such responsibility the character can begin to assume only in becoming aware of and accepting the complexity, if not the absurdity, of existential humanity, as does Jim Kelly, the plantation tractor driver and maintenance man who serves as a constant reminder to his ward, the intractable youth Marcus, of his responsibility for his own predicament.

The central character of Catherine Carmier is Jackson Bradley. Just out of college in California, Jackson returns to his south Louisiana birthplace and boyhood home where his aunt Charlotte has long anticipated his return, expecting him to remain and teach school in fulfillment of a boyhood vow. His boyhood love for Raoul’s daughter, Catherine, is reactivated, thus further complicating the plot, for Jackson is a Negro. The Cajuns seize the occasion to bring the downfall of both men, Raoul’s for obvious reasons, and Jackson’s because they suspect him of harbingering civil rights activities in the area. Some readers see the resolution of the Raoul-Jackson conflict, involving a fist fight over Catherine which Jackson wins, as defective. Jackson will leave the community, having made peace with his possessive aunt Charlotte; Catherine, reversing her decision to accompany him, will remain to care for her physically and spiritually crushed father. Some feel that the concluding circumstances call for Jackson and Catherine’s leaving together, but Raoul’s projective recovery from his spiritual defeat, requiring Catherine’s assistance, and in keeping with Gaines’s emphasis on the open future, appeared to be the right conclusion, in view of the symbolic meaning of the conflict: a divided black community in need of reunification in the face of a persistent traditional adversary. This kind of reconciliation is also suggested at the end of Miss Jane Pittman as the leaders of
the local civil rights protest pick out “a girl to drink from the white people’s fountain. (This was their Miss Rosa Parks.) She was one of the Hebert girls, a Catholic, up there in Bayonne. The Catholics and mulattoes [Creoles]10 don’t generally get mixed up in things like this, but this girl wanted to do it. Her own people didn’t know nothing about it till after it happened” (JP 232).

The Hebert girl might have been Raoul’s Lillian—for it is Lillian, after all, who arranges for Jackson and Catherine’s coming together at the Catholic (Creole) dance hall in Bayonne, possibly with the dual but ambivalent, and ambiguous, motives of uniting them and of hastening the showdown between Jackson and Raoul. Or she might have been Catherine, a Catherine sufficiently disengaged from the Creole traditions and pretensions of Raoul and his people and more a leaner on the gate (CC 115) in the manner of her mother Della who, Mme. Bayonne explains, “was nothing like Raoul . . . and his people. Their color? Yes, their color. But color is only skin deep, and below that Della is as much Negro as you or I,” she tells Jackson. “Raoul is not. No, he’s not white either. He hates one as much as he hates the other” (CC 114). Ironically, the Hebert girl is a spiritual daughter of Raoul; she is “the One” in the sense that the young Negro Jimmy is in Miss Jane Pittman, the long anticipated deliverer of his people. She is Jimmy’s Creole complement in that novel as Raoul’s Catherine is potentially Jackson’s in Catherine Carmier.

NOTES

1 The theme of religious intolerance in Gaines parallels the Negro-Creole disjunctive, as exemplified by the old Creole Monsieur Bayonne’s insistence, in “The Sky Is Gray,” that the protestant boy protagonist “pray in Catholic” (BL 69). Generally, Gaines posits a humanistic datum for religion. Note in this regard Jackson Bradley’s aunt Charlotte in Catherine Carmier who forgives her nephew’s refusal to remain with her in the South and teach in observance of a boyhood vow, only after the pastor of her church visits her sickbed and reminds her of her Christian responsibility to love, not to possess, Jackson. Thus, ironically, what Jackson had regarded as a near impossibility comes to pass through the efficacy of the church he had nearly rejected (CC 184-185).

2 Gaines’s acknowledged influences are Turgenev and his contemporaries in Russia, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Er-
nest Hemingway. Gaines may lean a bit too heavily on his models in parts of his earlier works, but in the short stories and in his best novel to date, *Miss Jane Pittman*, he achieves stylistic independence. We are constantly aware of Jane Pittman’s historically representative narrative voice imparting a quality (caught at times in the earlier novels, more frequently in the stories in *Bloodline*) that is uniquely Gainesian. In *Miss Jane Pittman* it is the patient/urgent voice of Black American History itself.


5 *Black Portraiture in American Fiction*, p. 6.

6 Jackson’s recognition not only universalizes his and Raoul’s respective agonies, it is also one of several thematic nodes in the narrative emphasizing the loss from disunity in the black community, of which the Jackson-Raoul contention over Catherine is metaphorical.

7 The imagery is more assimilated into the narrative texture than might appear in these isolated quotations. Also, as a satanic figure Raoul partakes of the infernal nature of his nemesis, the Cajuns, ironically.

8 In the account of Raoul’s “inheritance” of the house, which housed a former overseer and his family, we perceive it as a “house” in the classical Greek sense (i.e., the fated house of Atreus), just as the plantation big house in *LD* is described by one of the characters as “the house that slavery built” (*LD* 216). The account also indicates the extent of Raoul’s inheritance of traits of character from his father, Robert. The circumstances of the house’s acquisition by Robert says a great deal about the complexity of the human relationships in Gaines’s milieu (*CC* 8).

9 Jim Kelly, a type of the suffering servant, capable of articulating his and other’s suffering in terms of a larger thus enlightening frame of reference, is one of Gaines’s most engaging characters. In his expertise with tractors, with machinery in general, he is the counterpart of Jane Pittman’s first husband, Joe Pittman, a trainer of horses. (The Greek hero Achilles was a “breaker of
horses.") He lends a mythical dimension to the novel in his recurrent, artfully assimilated observations on God’s ways to man, with its emphasis on human responsibility. The scampish Marcus on that plantation without Kelly, his keeper and guide, is inconceivable.

10 Here and in the dance hall scene (CC 215) are the only cases I recall of Gaines’s interchanging the terms Creole and mulatto.