Ernest J. Gaines has commented that what makes his writing different from that of other modern Southern writers is his engagement with the cultural and racial diversity of Louisiana (Gaudet and Wooten 81). Even among Louisiana artists, he has created a particular niche by situating that diversity in rural areas rather than New Orleans. Though his stories have been noted for their emphasis on black-white relationships, he has been careful from the beginning of his career to distinguish Cajuns from white Creoles and African-Americans from Creoles of Color. Moreover, these categories are not merely part of a contemporary practice of local color; they usually carry thematic and even moral weight in his narratives. For example, even though he has remarked that in the world of his childhood Cajuns were simply “whites who spoke French” (Gaudet and Wooten 84), he consistently characterizes them as the source of trouble and even evil. From Catherine Carmier (1964) to A Gathering of Old Men (1983), Gaines shows them to be the most racist of the white characters, willing to commit acts of violence against blacks. In addition, they pose an economic threat by using their whiteness to gain control over the land and thereby displace blacks who have worked the plantations since slavery. Even when Gaines complicates this image, as he often does, it remains the point of reference. Similarly, his use of Creoles, who emphasize their descent from early Spanish and French settlers much more than their race, serves as a means of presenting the underlying social rules in the context of race.

An analysis of one particular group—Creoles of Color¹—can demonstrate how he makes thematic and formal use of the racial-ethnic complexity of rural Louisiana. It is important to note from the beginning that Gaines is not concerned with ethnographic precision in his depiction of this group. While the term “Creoles of Color” itself is ambiguous, historians and sociologists tend to categorize them as mixed-race descendants of the Spanish and French settlers of the region; their families are also presumed to have been free before the Civil War.² As such, they
had certain legal rights, including the right to own slaves. They are thus distinct from blacks in terms of both descent and status and from whites in not being racially “pure” and not having full legal rights. It is this position of “in between” that enables Gaines to make use of them in his fiction. In part, they represent the arbitrariness of “race” as a signifier, since they are frequently represented as more like their white progenitors than the legitimate, “white” descendants. In addition, they often suggest the invidiousness of race, as they adopt racist attitudes toward blacks even as their own status declines in modern Louisiana. One ironic effect of emancipation was a social restructuring that changed a tripartite into a binary racial order; Creoles increasingly came to be treated as “black,” rather than as a separate category (Dorman 166–79; Dominguez 23–55). It can even be argued that their presence enabled Gaines to explore issues of racial self-hatred at a time when the emergence of black cultural nationalism made it difficult to tackle the subject directly.

In three works—Catherine Carmier (1964), “Bloodline” (1968), and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971)—Gaines explores key themes of his fictional world through such characters. These works are developmental in that the first assumes Creole identity to be distinct, while the later ones increasingly emphasize a racial binary in which mixed-race people are presented as “really” black, regardless of their self-identification.

Catherine Carmier provides the fullest version of the Creole self and its relationships. The title character and her family see themselves as clearly distinct from both their African-American and Cajun neighbors. Within the family, it is only the patriarch Raoul who is able to sustain the tension of his difference, and he does so at great cost. All the women seek in effect to reduce themselves to the terms of the social binary. Della, his wife, has an affair with a black man and has a son by him. The younger daughter, Lillian, has decided to move North and pass for white. Catherine, in the central storyline, is in love with Jackson, a black man who has left the community to be educated and has returned temporarily. Gaines isolates this family rather than placing them within a Creole community such as existed near the area where he grew up, which is the model for the setting of the novel.

Such isolation enables the author to focus on the life-denying effects of social and racial inwardness. Raoul can only sustain his identity by refusing connection with his black neighbors; he ignores them as much as possible and, as will be seen, reacts violently to any intrusions by them into his world. At the same time, because of his own white Creole ancestry, he views the Cajuns as his social inferiors, even though they increasingly control the land and the economy. He is left to rely only on himself and his household of women.

Because Gaines writes in a strongly male tradition, that household is problematic and ultimately perverse. It can be argued that Catherine Carmier, like the other works discussed here, is primarily about patriarchal order and inheritance. In this sense, lines of descent become crucially important. Raoul and Della are unable to have a son; she, however, does have one as a result of her affair with a black man. But because Marky is not a “pure” son, he cannot be Raoul’s heir. Having Della as his mother is not sufficient, since she is considered problematic by
Raoul’s family even before their marriage. Though light-skinned, she does not set herself apart from blacks and thus cannot be truly Creole. Marky is a not-un surprising product not merely of illicit intercourse but also of ethnic betrayal. Her husband effectively isolates Della not only within the community but also within her own house by refusing to speak to her. Her daughters, without quite understanding why, take on their father’s attitude and see their mother as mere furnishing. Lillian has been taught by Raoul’s relatives to hate her mother, and Catherine has taken on the nurturing and support of her father that he refuses to accept from his wife. Della’s betrayal of the Creole part of her heritage causes her family to ostracize her in her own home.

The desire for purity has profound effects on the generation of the children. Lillian, while still a small child, is taken away by Raoul’s family to be raised in the city as a true Creole. As a result, she hates both her parents, as well as blacks, but also recognizes the narrowness of the life she has been trained for. Unable to live with any of the choices available to her in this world, she decides to leave both Louisiana and her ambivalent racial identity. Gaines is careful to indicate that it is Lillian’s preparation as a “good” Creole daughter that produces the desire to escape: she must either live a circumscribed, rule-bound life, or she must move outside of that world altogether. But to make that move, she must give up her identity and heritage; in the larger American world, there is no place for a “third race” of those who are both black and white, yet neither. Given her skin color, her only option is to disappear into the white world.

Marky pays the ultimate price for insistence on Creole identity. As the illegitimate son of Della and an unidentified black man, he is doubly outcast because he is the result of both adultery and ethnic treason. Though he is a son and a very pleasant child, he is hated by Raoul, so much so that he eventually kills Marky in what is officially labeled an accident. This crime is what establishes Raoul as a tragic character in the novel, since it is his racial pride that produces both his best qualities and this act of murder. When he is finally humbled by Jackson at the end of the story, Della sees it as justice for her dead child: “If you was anybody else, you wouldn’t ‘a’ lived to walk out of this yard. But you Jackson. Marky. You been Marky ever since he—is since he died” (247–48).

If Lillian and Marky are the white and black ends of the spectrum, Catherine is the child caught in the middle, the one who is truly Creole. As such, her destiny in the narrative suggests the reasons Gaines sees that identity as a dead-end. Like her mother, she has an illegitimate child, but in her case the father is Creole, and thus her child is safe, if not highly regarded, in Raoul’s house. She also is in love with Jackson, but refuses to either marry or go away with him. Unlike her sister, she admires their father’s courage and persistence and prefers staying with him to seeking other possibilities. Though she lacks his disdain for blacks, she is clearly seen as other by both blacks and Cajuns. Her relationship with Jackson is understood by all as a violation of the rules of the racial order.

One meaning of her situation is that the Carmier house becomes an incestuous space even without acts of sexual violation. Catherine effectively displaces her mother as Raoul’s wife. While he never speaks to Della, Catherine is the one he
consults on matters of the land and the one for whom he buys gifts. He drives off the Creole father of her baby, thus becoming her husband and the baby’s father himself. Moreover, Jackson clearly sees Raoul as the true competition for Catherine’s affections. Her attitude is highly ambivalent, in that she seems to worship her father and to willingly play the role of wife, yet she appears to truly love Jackson. At the end of the novel, after Jackson has beaten Raoul in a fight (caused by his desire to take her away from her father), Della makes two observations to the victor after Catherine leads her father into the house. The first of these is that he has in fact restored a natural order by gaining Marky’s revenge and by destroying Raoul’s superhuman image in Catherine’s mind. This will enable Della to regain her place as his wife, since the humiliation will force Raoul to send his daughter away. And thus her second point is that Jackson will get Catherine as his reward, even though she is comforting her father. But the narrative concludes without such optimism: “He stood there hoping that Catherine would come back outside. But she never did” (248). The consequence of Catherine’s ambivalence is that she seems locked in place, unable to move into any future.

This ambiguous ending suggests both the attraction and the limitation of Creole identity. Because it is an identity that is necessarily obsessed with bloodlines—neither blacks nor most whites have the appropriate ancestry—it must focus on the past rather than the present or future. In doing so, it limits its possibilities for the future. The bloodlines become more narrow and more restrictive even as pride in them and arrogance because of them increases. Since in Gaines’s world change is constant, a Creole perspective represents a life-denying fixation. A Raoul may be heroic to an extent that the black characters in much of his fiction cannot be; he can at least look back to a different ancestry, one that gives him the pride and heritage necessary to openly resist white encroachments. At the same time, to protect that inheritance, he must destroy any future that varies from the past. Because the future, from the point of view of the emergent South of 1964 (the year of the novel’s publication), was to be black and white, the Creole had to die.

The 1968 short story “Bloodline” develops one aspect of the Catherine Carmier narrative. It focuses on the father-son relationship, on inheritance and dispossession, and on identity across racial lines, as interconnected parts of a patriarchal story. It is the mirror image of the earlier fiction in that the son, Copper Laurent, is the generally-acknowledged child of the white landowner who returns to claim his inheritance after the father’s death. Again, Gaines does not provide the key character with a Creole community. One reason for this is technical; Copper is not truly Creole of Color since, though his father is of white Creole descent, his mother is simply a black woman living on the plantation. Since his paternity has never been openly or legally established, his ethnic identity is ambiguous. It is precisely this ambiguity that gives the story its force. For Gaines, the defining qualities are Copper’s personality traits, which are identical to those of his father, and his asserted difference from the blacks of the plantation.

The narrative voice of the text, an elderly black man who has spent all his life on the Laurent plantation, provides an insider-outsider perspective that shapes our understanding of the events. Felix knows everything about the farm, including the...
“bloodlines,” and thus, he can validate Copper’s claim as a rightful if not lawful heir. At the same time, as one who is not himself Creole, he can clearly see the negative personality qualities the young man has acquired from his father. The son’s treatment of blacks reveals the same arrogance and even racism displayed by Walter Laurent. He not only overpowers the blacks sent to put him in his place; he publicly humiliates them. Moreover, Felix enables readers to see that Copper is a better Laurent than his Uncle Frank, who is a tired old man unable to command anyone’s respect.

Thus the story sets up Copper as a true Creole, both in character and in blood. However, because Louisiana has become like the rest of the South in its racial views, it is not possible for this Laurent to inherit the family estate, even though he is the only son in the direct line. In fact, there is no necessity, as there once was (in moral if not legal terms), to offer any kind of recognition. Copper is simply a black man, even if everyone knows his true paternity; in the modern world, his claims exist primarily in his own mind. For this reason, the text raises questions about Copper’s mental stability; he asserts that he is a general in a vast army of the dispossessed.

As with Raoul Carmier, here too, the obsession with the past leads to irrational behavior and a closing off of the future. Copper cannot accept the African-American community that exists in the present, but instead isolates himself in his quest for identity with the dead white father. At the same time, his quest is, paradoxically, the quest of all African-Americans. His claim, by blood and by connection to the land, is metaphorically the claim of all those enslaved, exploited, and dispossessed of their place in the life of the nation. Gaines gives Copper a speech near the end of the story that establishes this connection: “I’ve seen a little bit of everything in this world, but suffering more than anything else. There’re millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me. And who is to blame? . . . Men like my father. Men like Walter Laurent” (213). Gaines uses Copper here to make a point about American society. The Creole, tied by blood to both sides of the racial divide, signifies the failure of the national community to acknowledge and respect all of its members. The result is the divided self described by W. E. B. Du Bois: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (38). If Copper shares his father’s identity and thus hates the black part of himself, the very intensity of that connection enables him to feel profoundly the wrong done to that black part of the self and the nation.

The story “Bloodline” serves as a turning point in the history of the South as well as that of Louisiana. The white uncle rejects Copper’s claim, but in doing so, he is acknowledging the end of the world of Creoles, both black and white. No longer can a son such as Copper be recognized within the social structure; because the world is now black and white, he must play by the rules of the more general racial order. Frank’s age and infirmity thus symbolize the transformation of Louisiana into an indistinguishable part of the nation. The recognition of the justice of Copper’s claim, even with the refusal to act upon that awareness, signifies the
historical necessity of a new order in the South. Both men, then, are anachronisms, unable to face a truly new South.

While *Catherine Carmier* and “Bloodline” focus primarily on the effects of a third race identity on Creoles themselves in a changing Louisiana, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* gives its attention to the impact of racism on whites. The deleterious effects of a racialized social order on members of the dominant group has been a theme of black writing since the slave narratives. In this narrative, it is precisely the status of the nonwhite characters as Creole that enables Gaines to show the impact on the white character. He chooses to concentrate on Tee Bob Samson, the scion of a white Creole family, a sensitive and, in the view of other characters, fatally naïve figure.

The first incident involves Timmy, Tee Bob’s companion assumed by everyone on the plantation to be Robert Samson’s son by one of the black women. Like Copper of “Bloodline,” Timmy is very much his father’s son in appearance, attitude, and behavior; he is also the older of the two brothers, and thus his greater similarity might be considered symbolic of rights of primogeniture, if such rules applied across racial lines. Tee Bob, even as a child, understands that Timmy is his older brother and treats him as such, but because the darker son is in fact not white, he must be treated as a social inferior despite his biological heritage. Thus, he is technically Tee Bob’s servant even as he engages in all the behaviors common to a Samson man. While careful not to offend any of the whites, Timmy adopts the same attitude of superiority toward blacks as did Copper of the earlier story. Thus, he plays practical jokes even on the elderly Jane, with his father’s tacit approval. In fact, one purpose of his relationship with Tee Bob seems to be to define for the legitimate son the meaning of Samson male identity.

The complexity of his status becomes clear when Tee Bob is slightly injured in a riding accident. Tom Bob, the poor-white manager of the plantation, uses the situation to vent his hostility:

> He hated Timmy with all his might. Timmy got away with too much from that house up there. He knewed that Timmy was Robert Samson’s boy, and he hated the Samson in Timmy much as he hated the nigger in him. More, because it was the Samson blood in Timmy that made him so uppity. (145)

Timmy exacerbates the problem by refusing to show any respect and by calling Tom Bob “white trash.” The white man then beats the child nearly to death. The end result is that nothing is said to the manager, and Timmy is forced to leave the plantation. Those are the “rules” of the New South, and Robert Samson, like Frank Laurent, accepts and enforces them. There is no place in the new order for figures such as Timmy, not only because anyone with black ancestry can only belong in that subordinate category, but also because “white” has become a restrictive category, lumping together “white trash” and Creoles. The racial binary limits the class power of a Robert Samson. “Creole,” in the last analysis, has lost its significance on both sides of the racial divide. Tom Bob can demand and get the protection of his whiteness; neither paternity nor social class can resist the racial claim.
In this instance, Gaines chooses to focus, not on the injustice to the Creoles of Color character, but rather on the psychological impact on the white brother. Tee Bob is both a truly new and truly old white Southerner; for him personal relationships are more important than the most powerful of ideological abstractions. He refuses to understand or accept the dismissal of his brother. Jane, as narrator, informs us that the situation is explained to him multiple times, by both blacks and whites. The only one who refuses to do so is his father, who assumes the complete naturalness of such rules and so will not engage the reality of his son’s “blindness.”

The full significance of the refusals of both father and son become apparent later, when Tee Bob falls in love with Mary Agnes LeFabre, who is the only one of Gaines’s Creoles of Color characters to be linked to an ethnic community. What is noteworthy is that that community is presented primarily to suggest its isolation and arrogance and not to serve as the basis for Mary Agnes’s identity. In fact, she is disowned by them because she wishes to live in a different community in order to teach black children. It is her desire to be with such children that is her true “wrong.”

Thus, Gaines brings together two characters alienated from their respective societies. But it is Mary Agnes who has the clear understanding of the limitations of any relationship. She is careful to maintain an emotional distance even as Tee Bob’s feeling becomes stronger. She knows, as he does not, that the only kind of relationship that will be tolerated is one requiring the loss of her integrity and self-respect. Again, he refuses to hear when others explain the situation: she can be his “whore,” but never his lover or wife. Only when he offers to take her away and marry her does she grasp the full meaning of his fatal attraction and innocence. When she cannot persuade him of the impossibility of his scheme, she begs him to leave. She interprets his refusal in the same terms as his white friends: the right of the Southern white male to control the black woman through sexual domination. She responds by offering him her body. Only when he recognizes her gesture does he realize the meaning of his skin color and sex, not only to her but to all others as well. He now can read the messages of the advice given him, of Timmy’s dismissal, of Mary Agnes’s submission.

But it is a knowledge he will not live with. He rejects the “rules” of his father’s world; he rejects an identity as “white male” if it deprives him of authentic emotional relationships that might transcend racial boundaries. The fates of Timmy and Mary Agnes demonstrate to him that there is no escape from that identity he rejects. He reacts by committing suicide, in effect preferring death to such a life. His act suggests a strong strain of naturalism that runs through Gaines’s work. Consistently, race is such a determining force that the most powerful characters must submit to it. Even white men in economic and political control, such as Robert Samson, are not free to break the rules. Certainly a weaker figure, such as his son, cannot hope to do so. Gaines seems to suggest through Tee Bob the limitations of individual choice and action within the social order and historical situation. Just as his strong black characters in this novel die when they challenge the existing order, so being “the good white” does not guarantee either success or survival.
Timmy and Mary Agnes serve as the mechanisms for demonstrating this point. Because of their mixed ancestry, which establishes a link to Tee Bob’s race as well as a difference from it, he is presented with opportunities to feel, if not think, his way beyond the fixed categories of race. Moreover, because they have a sense of themselves as outside those categories, they can respond to his gestures. Mary Agnes says of him: “She talked to him like she talked to a brother or a first cousin. She had always looked at him like that; like he was more like her; not like he was a white man” (175). Because of them, Tee Bob can imagine himself not a white man, at least not in the sense insisted on within his society. But the others cannot afford such race transcendence. In fact, it can be argued that Timmy and Mary Agnes suffer their fates in part because they forget their blackness for a moment, Timmy by showing Creole superiority to “white trash” and Mary Agnes by thinking that she really could treat Tee Bob as an equal.

Creoles of Color characters in Gaines’s early fiction serve to challenge both the rigidity of racial differences and the promise of a color-blind society. The mixed-blood character has often been used in African-American literature as a way of demonstrating the arbitrariness of racial distinctions and as an argument for equality. Ernest Gaines develops a variation on this theme through the distinctive situation of Creoles, both black and white, in Louisiana. He can show not merely individual achievement but also family ties that bind the races together. But beyond this, he situates his stories in an era in which those connections across racial boundaries have broken down. In their place are rules of ever-stronger division that reject the in-between status that gave Creoles of Color an identity. Thus, what had traditionally been a figure of possibility for a different America as imagined in African-American writing becomes instead a sign of greater limitation. As he reflects on his native state, Ernest Gaines sees that Louisiana’s increasing similarity to the rest of the nation as cause for despair.

NOTES

1. Editors’ Note: Within some Creole communities in Louisiana, the term Creole is used to identify both mixed blood and white Creoles. For those who use Creole as a term inclusive of both ethnicities, the term is not a racial descriptor, but a cultural one. For the purpose of clarity in this essay, Professor Byerman’s terminology which illustrates the distinctions between these groups has been left intact. His use of these terms reflects other researchers’ use of the term. For further clarification of these terms, see Sybil Kein (2000) and Virginia Dominguez (1986).

2. See Brasseaux et al, xi–xiii; and Mills, xiii–xiv.
3. See Gaudet and Wooten, 80–82; and Brasseaux et al; passim.

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