Wrestling Angels into Song

The Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson

Herman Beavers

University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia
Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publishers and individuals for permission to cite from published materials:


Little, Brown and Company: James Alan McPherson, *Hue and Cry* and *Elbow Room*.

JCA Literary Agency: Ernest J. Gaines, *Of Love and Dust, Bloodline, and Catherine Carmier*.


William Morris Literary Agency: international rights to cite from the works of Ralph Ellison.


Copyright © 1995 by the University of Pennsylvania Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Beavers, Herman.
Wrestling angels into song: the fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James Alan McPherson / Herman Beavers.
p. cm. — (Penn studies in contemporary American fiction)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8122-3150-3
PS3557.A355Z594 1994
813'.5409—dc20 94-24523
CIP
In those empty spaces, times intersect and our relation with things is reversed: rather than remembering the past, we feel the past remembers us. Unexpected rewards: the past becomes present, an impalpable yet real presence.

—Octavio Paz, “The Tree of Life”

say it for nightmare, say it loud
panebreaking heartmadness:
nightmare begins responsibility.


Chapter 3
Tilling the Soil to Find Ourselves: Conversion, Labor, and [Re]membering in Gaines’s Of Love and Dust and In My Father’s House

Community functions in numerous fictional narratives by African American authors as the repository of memory, a space where the individual’s redemption hinges upon collective acts of remembering. In this respect, these communal acts of reconstructing the past are vehicles of identity for those who choose to harness them as such. One thinks here, for example, of Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, where Milkman engages in what begins as a materialistic quest for gold and ends as a genealogical journey that leaves him face to face with the knowledge that he is part of an ancestral legacy that includes self-generated flight. Morrison’s novel operates within a corpus of novels in which we find a protagonist who, individually, fails to utilize the personal resources necessary to constitute a viable identity.¹ It is the com-
munity (or figures in the community who represent the collective memory of the group) that often provides the cultural and historical impetus that leads the individual to a state of recovery and rebirth, often because information passed down from elder to progeny allows the individual to reassess the present, to confront its dilemmas with a renewed sense of purpose.

I would like to propose, however, that it is equally important to bring our critical energies to bear on fictions in which the individual, in order to reach a new state of awareness or self-recovery, must break free from repressive paradigms of folk memory. For there is likewise a need to consider fiction that follows this second impulse: where the protagonist must break out of an older, restrictive circle of memory in order to move into a space where he or she can begin to utilize the past in new ways. In examining this narrative pattern, I hope to clarify the necessity of considering fictional black communities in a context of greater complexity. To argue that the individual will always find him or herself within the space of the collective is likewise to propose that personal forms of struggle become meaningful only in such spaces. We must remember that the blues represent a moment of disjuncture, a break from the group that brings greater clarity than the collective is capable of furnishing at the time. The blues assert that the value of community lies not in the loss of individuality but in the maintenance of processes that valorize acts of individualism, even when those actions appear antithetical to communal interests.

One example of this trajectory in African American literature is to be found in the Trueblood scene (Chapter 2) in Invisible Man. Neither the act of remembering nor the storytelling that memory prompts is sanctioned by the community. Trueblood emerges as a figure engaged in unsanctioned activity, a member of the community who inspires both shame and distance on the part of the community. He is described as an individual who brings "disgrace upon the black community." "Several months before," the narrator continues, "he had caused quite a bit of outrage up at the school, and now his name was never mentioned above a whisper" (Invisible Man, 46). The narrator withholds the nature of Trueblood's transgression, though it is clear that the sharecropper is a source of communal humiliation emanating directly from the collective's awareness of the white community's negative perceptions of black behavior. Members of the college community, in particular, are embarrassed by his crude ways but tolerate them because white visitors are "awed" by the "primitive spirituals" Trueblood sings. But after he commits his disgraceful act this attitude changes, and
what on the part of the school officials had been an attitude of contempt blunted by tolerance, had now become a contempt sharpened by hate. I didn't understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the "peasants," during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down. (Invisible Man, 47)

While the narrator does not elaborate on it, I want to call attention to the fear a man like Trueblood evokes. We are first made aware of Trueblood's "sin," his incest with his daughter that leads to her pregnancy, when the narrator provides Mr. Norton with a truncated version of the tale. But this serves only to pique the latter's curiosity and he feels compelled to hear the tale from the original source. As Houston Baker has pointed out, the sharecropper's story inspires fear and shame in the college community because they construct themselves in opposition to Trueblood and "his kind." As figures of upward mobility, members of the college misinterpret men like Trueblood as symbols of the past in need of repression. Their sense of themselves, mediated by the vision of the college's white patrons, is almost wholly oriented toward the future. The implication is that Trueblood satisfies a longing for the plantation past, at the expense of black progress. Mr. Norton's insistence that African American achievement and identity are yoked to his destiny makes this unacceptable, given what the narrator concludes is the former's sophistication, success, and power. To break from Trueblood, therefore, is also to break from what the college community remembers as a history of victimization. This, in order to move into a space of acceptability. However, as Baker asserts,

In the Trueblood episode, blacks who inhabit the southern college's terrain assume that they have transcended the peasant rank of sharecroppers and their cohorts. In fact, both the college's inhabitants and Trueblood's agrarian fellows are but constituencies of a single underclass.

Baker goes on to suggest that "expressive representation is the only means of prevailing" in this instance. What we know, of course, is that Trueblood, at that point when he is farthest down, ostracized, and a disgrace to friends and family alike, decides to sing the blues.

I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat nothin' and I don't drink nothin' and cain't sleep at night. Finally, one night, way early in the morning', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singing. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I ends up singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night that ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't
nobody but myself and ain't nothin I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. (*Invisible Man*, 65–66)

Trueblood's decision is likewise an act of remembering, in this instance, a moment where he reconfigures his shattered life as blues metaphor and thus accepts himself and his plight. By doing so, Trueblood positions himself to confront the future, however precarious it may prove to be. This has serious implications, for he concludes that he will view the circumstances as an instance of creative possibility where he chooses symbolization over self-reproach. Hence, as Ellison's language alludes to Trueblood's achievement of a position betwixt and between (his performance occurs at a moment "one night, way early in the morning"), it also proposes a way to "read" experience via a paradigm the community at large refuses to implement. By contrast, Trueblood's predicament equivocates guilt and innocence, his journey from the sacred to the secular collapses his former status as entertainer, moving him directly into a self-constituted performance space. What I am most concerned with here is the manner in which Trueblood's liminal blues and, later, his telling and subsequent retellings of his tale, all occur in a space the black community is loathe to sanction. But that refusal arises because they do not know how to construct an unmediated identity capable of filtering out the negative assessments of the white community. While they cannot will Trueblood into oblivion, they can ignore him, reduce him to the equivalent of a secret discourse maintained by communal consensus. The fact that Trueblood receives "more help than they ever give any colored man" does not, as the community concludes, imply his complicity in the furtherance of black stereotypes. Quite the contrary, Trueblood's position, as Baker argues, exists in a medium of exchange:

In African-American culture, exchanging words for safety and profit is scarcely an alienating act. It is, instead, a defining act in aesthetics. Further, it is an act that lies at the heart of African-American politics conceived in terms of who gets what and when and how. ("To Move Without Moving, 343–44)

While the material implications of Trueblood's actions are clearly manifested, it is also apparent that he has operationalized a system whereby his performance insulates him from communal censorship. In two novels by Ernest Gaines, *Of Love and Dust* and *In My Father's House*, it is censorship that mediates the tasks of the heroes. Like Trueblood, these protagonists adopt the paradigm of giving voice (or at least credence) to the painful aspects of their experience, of "reading" society by using themselves as the starting point for analysis. In a culture so devoted to amnesia, this willingness to use memory as a vehicle of
self-critique (and thus self-acceptance) runs counter to the societal impulse either to deflect responsibility or to forget it altogether. It is this antagonistic posture that informs the experiences of James Kelly and Phillip Martin. In their respective fashions, both men are forced to reconfigure their fragmented pasts in order to move into newly defined spaces from which they can reenact new identities. For Jim Kelly, this movement leads to storytelling, a transgressive act of voice. His narrative of departure is a liminal blues narrative that resists the conspiratorial silence hanging over the plantation from which he escapes. For Phillip Martin, the task of remembering calls for an act of transgressive listening. He must use other voices to fill in the silences he willed into being as a way of escaping the past he shared with his son. A reunion with his son ultimately jeopardizes his social position in the community in which he has served as a civil rights leader. Unlike Kelly, whose narrative voice occurs in the midst of a newly evolving self, Martin sees his life as a public figure shattered to the point where he must rejoin the past with the present as a way to reconfigure a transformation which he has only partially completed. The transformation he seeks, then, is one which neither ignores nor obscures personal failure; it eschews the mythic in favor of the coherent. Both these novels articulate the sense that identities are often formulated under duress. They showcase characters who, via evolution or revolution, must utilize the past to establish coherent selves. Though these selves are no longer as resilient as they were before tragedy occurred, neither are they as prone to delusion. As the blues suggest, the narration of tragedy marks the beginning of healing.

2

These issues first come to the fore in Gaines's Of Love and Dust. In this, his second novel, Gaines returns to his interest in depicting the conflict between old and new ways of life, the clash between old and new paradigms of identity formation. Within that project, memory serves as a powerful influence in his characters' lives: their lives are mediated by the social blueprint of Jim Crow, whereby violence is privileged in the collective memory because it is used to reinforce the segregation and racial codes that separate black from white. In this respect it is the memory of violence rather than actual force that enforces passivity and thus upholds the status quo.

This helps us to understand Gaines's decision to begin the novel in medias res, its narrative machinery already in motion. The effect of this strategy is to make the reader rely on an act of memory fully to ascertain the present. This can only be accomplished by retrieving the
details from the past that will make the encounter at the novel's outset meaningful. Thus, when Jim Kelly looks down the quarters and sees the rapidly approaching dust, he lacks the intuitive equipment to discern the dust's ominous potential. But as Gaines himself has pointed out in an interview with John O'Brien, dust functions as a metaphor for death, and so the novel's first image raises the question of survival and what kinds of resources are needed to do so.

As the title intimates, Gaines posits love as the antithesis of death. Though love is regenerative and capable of producing a new social condition, the characters lack the ability to institute love and resistance simultaneously. Dust obscures and negates this possibility, stirring acts of memory that prevent the quarters from seeing beyond it, from gazing forward in spite of the presence of evil and death. That Gaines renders "love" and "dust" as simultaneous events proposes that life on the Hebert plantation is characterized by stasis. He introduces two characters into this scenario of social death: Marcus Payne and Jim Kelly. When Marcus emerges out of the dust looking for Kelly, it represents that moment when the latter's past, present, and future become intertwined with the former. It could be argued that OJLove and Dust depicts Marcus's exploits; he represents a figure of resistance, while Jim serves merely as witness to the events surrounding Marcus's arrival. However, a more precise reading would lead us to conclude that the novel is a symbiosis between Marcus and Jim. Marcus needs Jim to tell his story, Jim tells his story because of Marcus's impact on his life. Moreover, there are problems with Marcus telling his own story—the reader would become trapped in the point of view of an outsider who lacks insight into the workings of the plantation and the quarters.

Thus Marcus cannot tell his own story because his actions always indicate his distance from the community. As Gaines explains:

When you get to Marcus, you get a one-sided thing. It's like trying to get Gatsby to tell a story of The Great Gatsby. You can't do that. I needed a guy who could communicate with different people. I needed a guy who could communicate with Bonbon, the white overseer, with Aunt Margaret, with Marcus. (O'Brien, Interviews)

Gaines's narrative strategy is realized through Jim Kelly; as the novel's overarching voice he serves the function of mediating among the plantation's various spheres. And like Nick Carraway, Jim's credibility as mediator is unobtrusive enough to lead the other characters to fill in the gaps in his narrative without displacing his narrative authority.

The mediation Jim undertakes is performed on the ritual ground of language. We find a clear example of this in his relationship with Sidney Bonbon, the Cajun overseer. Because Jim is well versed in the
language of mechanization, the farm machinery provides the circumstances for his relationship with Bonbon. As he recounts:

It was me when I showed Bonbon I was good with any machine he had there. Maybe if I hadn't showed him how good I was he wouldn't have put so much trust in me. He wouldn't have treated me different from the way he treated all the others. He wouldn't have told me things about himself, things about his family—things he never told nobody else. No I had to show him how good I could handle tractors. And every time I did, he told me a little bit more. And since I knew all about trucks and tractors, I was the person he chose.  

Jim's mechanical ability leads Bonbon to cross the boundary of racial difference into the space of sanctioned remembrance. Trucks and tractors provide the means for Bonbon to ignore Jim's inequity of social status, to add flesh, blood, and bone to his authoritarian presence as overseer. What this also suggests, however, is that Gaines equates labor and narration; Jim's status as "good worker" sets him apart from the other blacks on the plantation. This leads, as Keith Byerman has argued, to his medial status on the plantation; his fluency in the mechanical sphere makes him a receptacle of memory.

This is further exemplified by Jim's relationships with the other blacks in the quarters. While he could easily be the object of resentment due to his status, Jim avoids this because the other language he speaks is that of the blues. As guitar-playing blues performer, he gives voice to the rage, hurt, and frustration that characterize black life on the plantation. And because the blues is the cohabitation of pain and experience, Jim is a necessary presence in the community's well-being. Moreover, the musical expression of these feelings is acceptable to the whites on the plantation, who lack the ability to decode the songs' utility as social commentary. In addition, the intimacy Jim occasions in the quarters through his music positions him as both teller and character in the narrative structure of the novel. This allows him to recount Marcus's actions even as he gives voice to his (and thus, the quarters') anxieties about him. As bluesman, he can interpret the behavior issuing from Southern racial conventions, even as he can be openly critical of himself for failing to challenge them, for choosing ease over resistance.

But this points at the other aspect of Jim's character: his disillusionment. Jim's spiritual malaise translates into an inability to engage his environment. This is evidenced at its most basic level when he looks at the toilet in his backyard, "ready to tumble at the first light breeze." Though he promises that he'll fix it "[o]ne of these Saturdays" he knows this will never happen. At a more substantial level, there is Jim's indifference to the plantation store, with its two rooms, one for whites,
the other for blacks. This physical manifestation of Jim Crow represents a site maintained, at least in part, by consensus; though the blacks on the plantation may not like being segregated, the store's importance to their sustenance neutralizes their desire to challenge its racial policy. As Jim observes when he enters the store,

if you were colored you had to go to the little side room—"the nigger room." I kept telling myself, "One of these days I'm going to stop this. I'm going to stop this; I'm a man like any other man and one of these days I'm going to stop this." But I never did. Either I was too tired to do it, or after I had been working in the field all day I was too tired and just didn't care. (Dust, 43)

What makes this passage important to my critical purpose is that Gaines uses repetition to demonstrate, on one hand, Jim's frustration and anger. But more important, the fact that he repeats "I'm going to stop this," illustrates Jim's memory at work: he remembers all the times he has promised to resist degradation, projecting his resistance into the future. But this assertion is framed by two sentences in the past tense, indicating the way the future is overwhelmed by the past.

Moreover, the toilet and side room serve as effective representations of Jim's disempowerment: the latter as a place where he is victimized and feels powerless to resist, the former as a site of privacy gone awry. Jim responds to both places with an apathy he cannot overcome; he knows that action is called for but he cannot muster the resolve to act.

Despite his relatively comfortable status in the plantation hierarchy, Jim pays a price both publicly and privately.

Jim's disillusionment, we discover, emanates from a deeper well-spring of hurt. This becomes clear during the novel's opening chapters when Jim remembers his former lover, Billie Jean. Drawn by the fast pace and material trappings to be found in the city, Billie Jean abandons the plantation and Jim. We find out that he comes to the Hebert plantation, not because he wants to break from the past, but rather because he wants to sustain it. Hence, when he wakes before work, Jim sits on the bed, and remembers:

thinking about her and remembering four, five, six years back. Remembering the nights coming in from the field and the big tub of hot water waiting for me; and Billie washing my back, and then us in that old Ford, heading for town. And dancing and dancing until late, and then hurrying back to that bed and loving, loving, loving until morning. Then hitting that field again, half dead, and then back and the tub of hot water and the dancing and the loving. (Dust, 22)

"Maybe that's why [Daddy] hangs around here," he reflects, "It reminds him a little of the old place and he figures that one day you
might pass by and decide to stop" (*Dust*, 23). In an interesting turn, Jim refers to himself in the third person, as if to suggest a former persona, now lost. In this fragmented state, he is able to see the source of his pain, but incapable of bringing resources to bear to transcend it. Instead of utilizing his ability to play the blues and thus achieve some emotional distance from the past, Jim’s hope is that Billie Jean will return to loose him from his self-imposed exile. Hence Jim’s present hinges on this faulty paradigm of memory where all therapeutic means are located outside his purview; he cannot exert himself in any gesture oriented toward the future because he is trapped in the past.

This becomes clearer when, after a day of driving the tractor, Jim sits down with his guitar and starts to play:

I sat on the steps and started playing the guitar. I thought about Billie Jean and played softly at first, then I tried to forget her and played something fast and hard. But I thought about her again and went back to the soft thing, then I tried to forget her and went back on the hard. (47)

Here Jim’s inability to sustain a tempo for the duration of a song suggests that he can neither reflect, which would call for a critical attitude toward the past, nor forget, which would lead him to improvise a new, concrete (e.g., “hard”) pattern for his life. For all his facility with tools and repair, Jim cannot engage in an act of self-repair, largely because he cannot conceptualize narrative as a form of labor. Though he plays the blues, the passage above demonstrates his inability to use them as a tool to place Billie Jean into a functional perspective. As Sherley Anne Williams has observed:

The blues deal with a world where the inability to solve a problem does not necessarily mean that one can, or ought to, transcend it. The internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation, for the song itself is the creation of reflection.12

In short, Jim is not yet a blues performer because he fails to yoke performance to the task of reflection. Though he plays in the quarters, he subordinates the importance of interrogating his own experience to using the blues as a way to consume his leisure time. And because of the status that accrues from his work for Bonbon and Marshall Hebert, he sees no need to project the idea of labor into the personal sphere. Thus he does not recognize the blues as a “tool” whose value lies, not in restoring the past, but in shaping that damaged past into a usable resource.

It is important to recognize, then, that memory frames Jim’s workday, a variation on his life with Billie Jean where work is subordinate to physical pleasure. Indeed, the act of remembering is as much an act of
labor for Jim as working on the tractor. Because of his propensity to position relief outside himself, his crisis of agency can only be relieved by the illusion of an aggregated self provided by work. Further, as a member of a community whose sole purpose on a plantation is labor, Jim has no recourse to power, save that which is offered by religion. His religious faith takes the form of conceptualizing God as an indifferent figure, insensitive to a fault. Though Jim makes the sign of the Cross before he eats, he rarely prays due to his feeling that God “doesn’t hear a word,” having “quit listening to man a million years ago.” In Jim’s mind all God does is “play chess by Himself, or sit around playing solitary with old cards.” This view of God as a figure of total neutrality, coupled with his own apathy, indicates the level of Jim’s self-imposed peripherality. If he is a medial figure, he is likewise a marginal one; while he is far from indifferent about the plight of others, he lacks the self-interest necessary to question his own plight seriously. As such, he represents the communal voice in its most expedient form whereby the needs of the individual are subordinated to the needs of the group. But Gaines’s attention to Jim’s specific form of hurt suggests that his narrative masks a deeper imperative.

Marcus’s arrival in the quarters offers Jim an opportunity to discover a new kind of responsibility. Because the reader discerns the novel’s events through Jim’s consciousness, Of Love and Dust is significant as a work of fiction because it refuses to allow the reader to identify with heroic action of an individual sort. Jim’s narrative describes Marcus’s actions, but these come to us through the filter of his communal bias. Since Gaines does not present Marcus in romantic contour, we cannot step outside the quarters’ point of view to see his actions in terms other than those Jim privileges in his narration. As a result, Marcus is the classic badman from African American folklore. Paradigmatically, Gaines’s characterizations of Jim and Marcus evoke convergence and anomaly: the voices of the plantation “converge” in Jim’s act of narration, Marcus’s actions are anomalous, they resist conventional practice. Indeed, he appears to be incapable of getting along or fitting in anywhere on the plantation.

As I noted above, Jim’s status on the plantation grows out of his “bilinguality,” his ability to bridge discursive domains. However, this ability to mediate the boundaries between discursive systems works to cement, rather than challenge, the status quo. By contrast, Marcus is a figure of complete resistance, largely because he remains so self-interested. Soon after his arrival at the Hebert plantation, Marcus states, “I ain’t cut out for this kind of life.” In Jim’s narrative authority is such that we interpret this in the simplest terms possible: Marcus is unwilling to take responsibility for the man he killed and, thus, life on a
plantation is unacceptable. Further, because Jim recounts Marcus's uncooperative posture in a number of different settings, Marcus appears, through Jim's credible narration, as a threat to communal well-being.

But we need to address the manner in which the reader is prevented from formulating an alternative reading. Though Jim's life is characterized by its conformity and apathy, what shapes his relationship with Marcus is his adherence to the past, to the workings of memory. Marcus, as self-centered anti-hero, focuses his attention on the present and, later, on the future. He may realize the danger of such an attitude, however he values self-determination over group acceptance. In contrast, Jim's notion of self always functions within a system that produces either interdependence or approval. Thus, he tells Marcus, "You can't make it like that. . . . They got the world fixed where you have to work with other people" (Dust, 235). While Jim most certainly sees a conspiracy at work, he lacks the imagination necessary to envision an alternative. His statement articulates his desire to participate in an established paradigm. Hence, he believes that community should be preserved at all costs, even if it means that the individual must relinquish claim to the right to rebel.

Ironically, Marcus is victimized, at least partially, by the constraints of oral culture. According to Berndt Ostendorf, oral cultures never expand beyond the horizon of the present collective. They are finite and sedentary and, one should add, conservative and nationalistic. Their chauvinism is due to a strong adherence to a policy of withholding choice and stabilizing that balance of controls which has guaranteed survival until now. By way of compensation they will create a sense, however unfree, of togetherness and the means of ritual catharsis. But this will turn into a trap whenever any one member wants to assert his individuality and advance beyond the horizon of the group. 14

As badman, Marcus is described as "the convict," with a reputation for making trouble for the group. As such, he threatens the quarters' sense of well-being. Jim's narrative, though sympathetic to Marcus's plight, remains fixed upon Marcus's rebelliousness. These acts of resistance, large and small, challenge the rituals that shape and define relationships both within the quarters and without. For example, Marcus refuses to wear khakis out to the field, choosing to wear a silk shirt and dress shoes because he refuses to accept his lot on the plantation. In one of the novel's most humorous moments, he starts a brawl with Murphy Bacheron (another badman), a man "nobody was crazy enough to hit." As the brawl demonstrates, Marcus's rambunctious attitude is infectious to the point that the entire house erupts into violence. After attempting and failing to woo Pauline, Bonbon's black
mistress, he succeeds in seducing Bonbon's wife, Louise. As the fence around Bonbon's house symbolizes, Louise is both prisoner and prize. In a setting that has such prohibitive racial and sexual taboos, this is a transgression of the highest order, one that will most certainly have an impact on the collective.

Marcus seizes on this opportunity, despite the fact that it endangers both himself and the quarters. The reason for this, as Ostendorf alludes, is that the quarters are expected to exercise control. As the brawl suggests, anti-social behavior is not problematic until it threatens white control of the plantation. The quarters, and specifically Jim, are responsible for holding Marcus's behavior in check. Because of this imperative, the attitude that informs his actions is interpreted as recklessness instead of resistance. This is so, despite the fact that Marcus is clearly empowered by his liaison with Louise. Jim notices when "Bonbon came out there in the evening he made [Marcus] sweat again. But he didn't seem to mind" (119). And though Jim threatens him, Marcus continues his attempt to get closer to the overseer's wife. Jim concludes, "Sure as hell, that son of a bitch is going to start trouble before all this is over with" (123).

Jim's prediction is correct. Marcus's relationship with Louise becomes a communal threat and as such, inhibits communal activity. This indicates both the excessive nature of Marcus's power and the manner in which that power is simultaneously attractive and repellent. Marshall Hebert, the plantation owner, becomes intrigued with the prospect of using a physical confrontation between Marcus and Bonbon for his own ends. But it is here that we can begin to see the past's impact upon the quarters' sense of possibility. Bishop, who serves as Hebert's butler, refers to Bonbon's brothers and observes, "That boy touch Bonbon, them brothers go'n ride" (122). He knows that the lynching ritual used to enforce the sexual taboo between black men and white women is strictly, and often blindly, administered. The community's need to hold Marcus in check is indicative of the need to sacrifice the future in order to preserve the ritualized present. After they learn that Marcus has been recruited by Hebert to kill Bonbon, the quarters fear the kind of retribution Marcus's actions will precipitate. This is evidenced in Jim's description of the quarters:

Soon as I crossed the railroad tracks, I could see how dark and quiet the quarters was. There wasn't a light on in any house. There wasn't a child playing anywhere. Nobody sat out on the gallery waiting for supper to be done. Not even a speck of smoke came from any of the kitchen chimneys. The whole place was dark and quiet, it looked like everybody had moved away. But they hadn't moved away, they had locked themselves inside the houses. All of them had heard what Marcus was supposed to do and all of them was afraid (270).
In the face of a paradigm that consists of resourcefulness and resistance, the people in the quarters hold fast to the old ways.

Most certainly, Marcus is an individual to be feared by both the folk and the white plantation owner for he possesses the potential, were it to become collectivized, to topple the plantation system and render social ritual incomprehensible. Because his self-interest takes on such hyperbolic forms, the overt and covert forms of rebellion he enacts breaks the cycle of small skirmishes that hold the status quo in place. Before Marcus arrives, the quarters are satisfied with small victories gained at the system's expense or with status that, like Jim's, is calibrated inward in order to create the illusion of upward mobility. However, the plantation can accommodate this type of resistance because it leaves the larger system of Jim Crow intact. But Marcus's single-mindedness argues that defying convention through open resistance is a viable route toward an integrated self. Thus, his lack of humility, in light of the ways Jim Crow promotes passivity and self-immolation, is at once therapeutic and disruptive. In this light, Marcus challenges Jim to break out of his stasis when he asserts, "stop being old fashioned... Where would people be if they didn't take a chance? You know where? Right here. Right here in this quarter for the rest of they life" (248-49).

The problem is that the quarters exercise a collective memory, and thus they equate this form of individual risk-taking with death. Jim's narrating through the collective vehicle renders Marcus's act of signifying completely inert. However Jim's idolatrous relation to the past makes him incapable of switching the valence of Marcus's assertion from negative to positive.

He is prevented from seeing that, as a figure of resistance, Marcus is sufficiently empowered to confront history. Marcus's power is best exemplified when he puts his foot in the door to the Hebert house to keep Bishop from closing it in his face. The plantation's historical continuity with slavery is ruptured, and thus, Bishop tells Jim, "He just pushed his foot in there... The house his great-grandparents built. The house slavery built. He pushed his foot in that door" (215). Bishop, comfortable as a house servant via the status quo, knows that Marcus threatens not only his status but the viability of the system that creates it. Marcus's transgressive act ruptures the plantation's illusion of pastoral tranquillity. But more than this, he reveals the spurious relationship between racial inferiority and history. Though Marcus's actions could empower the quarters, their lack of interpretive equipment leads them to feel only fear and ambivalence: fear because they know that violence is a likely result and ambivalence because Marcus's actions unveil the plantation's illusion of order as unstable. Lacking an alternative paradigm to Jim Crow, they cannot conceptualize a way to
emulate Marcus's behavior while turning it toward socially productive ends.

The other aspect of Marcus's resistant posture is his willingness to use Marshall Hebert as a resource to achieve his own ends. He knows Hebert hates Bonbon and wants him to kill the overseer. Because blacks in the quarters are lower in the social hierarchy than either the plantation owners or the Cajuns, Hebert wants to manipulate Marcus by promising him that he will go free. This points at an important thread in Gaines's fiction. Despite the fact that it was self-defense that led Marcus to kill Hotwater, African Americans' lack of standing in the Louisiana legal system nullifies this aspect of the narrative. Since the system does not place high value on black lives, acts of intraracial violence are seen as a drag on the system of due process reserved for whites. The result is that quasi-legal measures have been put in place to contend with intraracial violence: one can be sent to the state penitentiary or bonded out to a plantation and work off the time. Lacking access to the self-defense plea after he kills Hotwater, Marcus must exploit the class conflict between the plantation owners and the Cajuns. While I would stop short of arguing for Marcus as a character possessed with capabilities of revolutionary scope, it is important to note his ability to exploit the rift between Bonbon and Hebert to his own advantage. The value of a man like Marcus is that his resistant posture becomes available to the community as a resource for collective change.

Part of Jim's role as narrator of Marcus's tale is to recontextualize intraracial violence, to give it a new meaning. In this sense, Jim represents the kind of perspectival shift necessary to see the macro-significance of events taking place on the Hebert plantation. Thus, at the end of the novel Jim observes:

And what had Marcus done that was so wrong? Yes, he had killed—yes, yes—but didn't they give him the right to kill? I had been thinking about this in the field all evening and I had said to myself, "Yes, yes; it's not Marcus, it's them. Marcus was just the tool. Like Hotwater was the tool—put there for Marcus to kill, like Bonbon was the tool—put there to work Marcus. Like Pauline was a tool, like Louise was a tool." (Dust, 269)

This marks Jim's realization that the "plantation system" is not a source of steady labor, but an intricately designed drama whose aim is to keep blacks in their place by pitting them against one another. By constructing Marcus, Hotwater, Bonbon, Pauline, and Louise as "tools," Jim redefines the nature of work and recognizes his own complicity in the plantation scheme. The Hebert plantation offers the illusion that black labor resides outside an historical context, but it requires the individual
to disconnect memory and narrative. Its numerous episodes of brutality and violence have sufficient repressive force to make physical labor a hindrance to acts of memory. Hence, through labor Jim can indulge his escapist impulse and thus provide the surrogate for a life with Billie Jean, a way of confining his marginality to a personal axis without considering the social axis. He must realize that he, too, is a tool: in assisting, in even a removed way, to break Marcus, he is maintaining both his own illusory status and the plantation’s racial hierarchy.

Throughout his stay on the Hebert plantation, Marcus’s propensity to satisfy his immediate desires have clashed with Jim’s more deliberate, community-minded routine. Jim’s status as narrator effectively prevents the reader from making a positive judgment on Marcus’s behavior. However, this is due to the fact that the latter’s rebelliousness and self-centeredness are seen through the lens of family and community. Within such contexts, these characteristics are injurious, if not potentially destructive. But Marcus’s act of manipulating the legal system (and Marshall Hebert) in order to be with Louise requires, as Jim comes to realize, radical vision and the courage necessary to pull it off. Further, seeing Marcus within the framework of the plantation hierarchy as a cog in a larger machine forces Jim to shift his point of view from the quarters as microcosm to the South as macrocosm. This gesture marks Jim’s shift in political consciousness and argues that Marcus is the anomaly that prefigures the paradigmatic shift of the civil rights activity of the next decade.

We must also recognize Jim’s relationship to machines, the source of his medial status, as a source of illusion. Though it ushers him into a kind of quasi-intimacy with Bonbon, inevitably his status as narrator is compromised because he is forced to remain neutral in plantation matters that would threaten his status as driver. In short, if Jim is to reach a narrative space where his voice can articulate the need to break out of the stasis that entraps him, he needs Marcus’s defiance. What this means is that *Of Love and Dust* is, in Patricia Waugh’s words, a “self-begetting novel.” Hence, after reading the novel, we are forced to consider the tone of Jim’s narration because of its abrupt shift. For this “shift” seemingly coincides with Marcus’s transition from badman to hero and likewise marks Jim’s transformation from mediator to bluesman. I would argue for critical precision here and assert that *Of Love and Dust* has been a story about Jim all along. Thus, we can account for his change in attitude toward Marcus:

No, I didn’t blame Marcus anymore. I admired Marcus. I admired his great courage. And that’s why I wanted to hurry up and get to the front. That’s why my heart had jumped when the tractor went dead on me—I was afraid I
wouldn’t be able to tell him how much I admired what he was doing. I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. He was the bravest man I knew, the bravest man I had ever met. (Dust, 270)

Jim sees Marcus’s attitude of resistance as the correct response to a confined state of being. Though the plantation almost breaks Marcus (and Gaines does suggest that Marcus undergoes a transformation of his own), Jim realizes that Marcus’s refusal to let go of his plans to run away is not the sign of irresponsibility. Rather, it is Marcus’s refusal to allow a corrupt system to define what he should value and how he should live.

It is clear that Jim’s transformation is substantive because it exposes the gap between de jure and de facto legal practices that the civil rights movement, beginning with Brown v. Board of Education, would later exploit. I want to suggest, however, that neither Marcus’s small (and failed) rebellion, nor Jim’s narration for that matter, bring about large-scale, concrete changes on the plantation, for Jim’s observation regarding Marshall Hebert is correct: “He was police, he was judge, he was jury” (198). But Jim’s story does serve another, albeit abstract, purpose: his voice stands against both the written representation of the event and the quarters’ interpretation of Marcus as troublemaker. By disclosing that what we know from Aunt Margaret will become a secret discourse, Jim’s voice bursts from the constraints of coded discourse to establish the political element undergirding blues performance.

Further, we can see Jim’s narrative as one which abandons disillusionment for faith. Though Marcus is killed before he can escape, what Jim embraces when he decides to see him off is the hidden potential of rebellion, the possibility of its success. Jim’s workday is disrupted by Marcus’s escape, which points to a more symbolic breakthrough: the memory of Billie Jean (the source of his ruined potential) is preempted as the iconic force in his life and remade into a cipher. Jim can now assign her any kind of meaning that he wishes, including that of a figure rendered inert by the past.

While Gaines gives no indication of a restoration of Jim’s religious faith, it is certain that he has recovered his integrity. This is best evidenced when he goes to see Marshall Hebert after Marcus’s death. When Hebert offers Jim a letter of recommendation, he is offering at once the warning that Jim must leave the plantation and a commodity whose price is Jim’s silence. However, unlike Ellison’s hero in Invisible Man, Jim opens the letter, reads it, and tells Hebert, “No, sir, I’ll get by. . . . Thanks very much” (278). Jim eschews the blind innocence that sealed the fate of Ellison’s hero, choosing instead to read beneath the surface of the text. This kind of active literacy occasions self-
determination and thus allows Jim to break out of the cycle of corruption underpinning the plantation’s hierarchy.

The necessity of Jim’s departure is understood by all the folk in the quarters. Indeed, in his final exchange with Aunt Margaret (a source of Jim’s narrative scope) we see how the community’s memory is selective, if not repressive. “Yes, you got to leave.... You see you won’t forget,” Aunt Margaret observes. When Jim asks, “You done forgot already, Aunt Margaret?” she responds in the affirmative (279). In a community so committed to oral history and storytelling, one would be hard pressed to believe Aunt Margaret’s claim. It does, however, imply several issues. First, she asserts that, on matters of interracial contact, memory and silence are an inseparable compound; to break silence and engage memory in such an instance is to invite punishment, if not death. Second, she knows that Jim’s transformation is such that he will create a new amalgamation: he will remember Marcus, what happened to him and why, and (perhaps most importantly) what made him heroic. Because of this, there is no way he can live within the constraints of the Hebert plantation.

The weight of Jim’s act is further underscored by the novel’s last scene. As Jim departs, Aunt Margaret accompanies him to the road. But after only a short distance, he observes, “When I looked over my shoulder, I saw her going back home” (281). The old woman’s return to the plantation signals the solitary nature of Jim’s choice, the singularity of liberation here. Moreover, the growing distance between him and Aunt Margaret, when contrasted with the novel’s opening scene (where Marcus emerged out of the dust), suggests Jim’s break with the past. In this sense, she is a double for Billie Jean, who turned her back on Jim to go elsewhere. Here, however, Jim abandons a fixation on the past in favor of self-interest.

Jim Kelly can be characterized as Wayne Booth’s “privileged” narrator. He has access to all the people who can give his narrative its fullest shape, but at no point in time does he make the claim that the story he relates is his own. He is therefore a narrator whose act of telling is not supported or corrected in an “implied author” of the text. It is left to the reader to infer that Jim’s departure from the plantation and the narration of the events that lead to it are interconnected. It is necessary, then, for the reader to perform an act of “re-vision” on Aunt Margaret’s receding form at the end of the novel. Whereas Jim’s gaze codifies the growing distance between them as the end of his life in the quarters, the reader must reverse this code and make it synonymous
with possibility. Jim Kelly's departure signals the end of his denial because he allows himself to embrace narration as a point of dehiscence rather than occlusion.

Moreover, Jim avoids the complex fate of Ellison's hero by assimilating the innovative posture characterized in Marcus's heroic behavior into his own actions. Jim does not help the reader to reach this conclusion because his telling of the tale is linear (with the exception of the flashbacks he weaves into the tale, which serve to fill out the narrative); it begins with Marcus's arrival on the plantation and ends with his own departure. The telling of the tale takes place shortly after he leaves, sometime in the same year. We know this because of Jim's observation that Julie Rand, Marcus's grandmother, has calendars on the wall that, as he says, "dated from the late thirties up to this year—forty-eight" (Dust, 10; my emphasis).

Of Love and Dust cannot be considered a framed tale, unless one also points out that the frame must be constructed by the reader of the text. While Jim's narration includes questions and answers to questions from the person he is addressing throughout the novel, at no time does he comment on the possibility his departure represents. Indeed, Jim remains in the performance mode; his act of disclosure remains true to the task of relating Marcus's story. This indicates both the pervasive nature of Marcus's presence and his own ambivalence on leaving the plantation.

This likewise indicates that Jim, on departing, moves into a liminal space from which he narrates his tale. He can offer commentary on the circumstances that lead to Marcus's death because they represent the tools of separation that allow him to break free from the plantation's illusion of comfort. But even as his view of Marcus changes, his view of himself remains largely beyond articulation. Also noteworthy is the fact that every time Jim relates either the thoughts of one of the characters or his own thoughts, these interior monologues are enclosed in quotation marks. There is no need for these thoughts to appear in this fashion unless Jim is giving voice to them, telling his listener what he or someone else was thinking. As the voice of the community (not just as the novel's narrator), Jim has access not only to the events as characters relate them, but to their personal responses to those events as well. As a good listener, skilled in call and response, Jim is adept at weaving these other thoughts into Marcus's narrative, using them to fill out the shape of his oral performance. But liminality also means that he can give voice to thoughts that, due to racial convention on the plantation, must remain private. Jim's ambivalence about himself reflects his inability to assemble a coherent sense of his place in the present. And since memory on the plantation functions in the service
of silence and restraint, Jim represents a radical break from plantation convention in his use of memory. His engagement of the mechanisms of remembering sever him from the role of communal voice; the blues he "sings" are his own. His act of narrative disclosure is the sign of a deprivatized consciousness, allowing him to give voice to his tale in its entirety. Thus, when he discloses the events surrounding Marcus's death and the antecedent emotional responses to it, his narrative functions in contrast to written history, placing events on equal footing with the perception of those events.22

The novel valorizes telling, not just remembering, as a sign of transformation; Jim's movement from innocence to insight is, in the end, as important as Marcus's death. For it must be remembered that Jim does not approve of Marcus's actions for the bulk of his narrative, largely because he sees events in communal terms. The shift into a metahistorical reading of events liberates him from the plantation's constraints, a shift that suggests that Jim's physical journey and the acquisition of a new voice are intricately connected. This would indicate that Gaines's novel is a reworking of the slave narrative: Jim moves from the neo-slavery of the plantation to an isolated, but nonetheless freer, narrative space. It is an ambiguous liberation to be sure: the black body here does not function inside the same metonymic space as that of the freedman, whose narrative requires authentication. Jim's "escape" leads him toward a form of solitude that belies the role of mediator: he does not "speak for" those who, like Aunt Margaret, have decided to stay in the quarters. Rather, their voices take up a place within his own voice: he sings the blues they refuse to sing. But only by considering Jim's act of disclosure within the novel's circularity can we see this. He is loosed from the collective suffering in the quarters, but we are left with no way to ascertain what awaits him beyond the plantation. We do not, for example, know with certainty how he will characterize his relationship with Billie Jean in his new life. His departure will allow both her and the Hebert plantation to function metonymically. More, we can infer from the manner in which Marcus inspires respect and admiration in Jim that he internalizes the value of personal rebellion, which includes rebelling against one's own delusions.

I have conceived of Of Love and Dust as a novel of conversion; Jim's narrative must be seen as a conversion narrative largely because his movement from complicity to voice is likewise a transition from stasis to mobility. In this regard the text argues for a kinship with In My Father's House, for there we find an invitation to ponder once again the
pervasive force of memory. If we are to believe W. B. Yeats's assertion that "memories are old identities," we must recognize the task of trying to unravel *In My Father's House* as one that poses the question of whether acts of self-transformation can (or should) render the past ineffectual. Moreover, I would argue that Gaines's intention is to show how difficult it can be both to narrate the past and resist static formulations of identity. Unlike *Of Love and Dust*, which deals with the relationship between intimacy and voice, this novel is informed by the relationship between intimacy and change. Certainly this, in part, requires us to read the novel as one that proposes to meditate on the necessities of African American leadership. However, what we find is that Gaines veers from the examination of leadership in terms of its public configurations. Rather, he portrays leadership as an enterprise often fraught with personal demons.

Set in the early 1970s at a time when the civil rights community was struggling to reassert itself after Martin Luther King's death, *In My Father's House* captures a moment of growing entropy. Phillip Martin is a civil rights leader in St. Adrienne, a small Louisiana town. This character represents an inversion of Gaines's usual depictions of the African American clergy, for Phillip Martin is an activist, neither conservative nor conciliatory despite his status as a clergyman. In what is surely an intentional turn, the character of Elijah describes Phillip Martin as "our Martin Luther King." And in the wake of King's death, with activism on the wane, as his name suggests, he "fills" the role of Martin.

But this kind of status is not without its problems, and it is here that we find Gaines investigating the problem of African American leadership. Heeding Ellison, whose own protagonist was generated by the sense that "when the chips were down, Negro leaders did not represent the Negro community," Gaines offers us a man whose career is marked by his heroic exploits, his seemingly unshakeable commitment to the community. As Gaines relates, what "Phillip Martin is called to do... is lead." Hence Phillip's role is to be in the foreground as the unquestioned authority behind civic activism. Phillip has achieved the charisma and public visibility sought by Ellison's hero, and unlike that character, he has internalized the belief that he is indestructible. Though he has successfully constructed himself as the icon for change in St. Adrienne, Phillip's control relies on his propensity to rely on what have become conventional forms of protest. As Keith Byerman points out, Phillip's problem is that protest has become so routine that the black middle class has become cynical about its effectiveness and the more radical elements question
the participation of whites. Martin, who established himself a decade earlier, cannot adapt his techniques to the changing circumstances. He still has the power, through his white associates, to compel action but not belief or enthusiasm. He is a man comfortable in the present but about to be bypassed by history.28

This marks a significant problem, for, as we will discover, Phillip is a man wholly constituted in the present and near future. As an activist, his actions would seem to be directed toward the future of St. Adrienne. However, he believes it is a future that requires his presence to give it shape and substance. But his reliance upon what has become an outmoded form of protest, his inability to improvise a movement capable of embracing new ideas and voices, speak to a deeper, more fundamental issue: his inability to reconcile the past and the present.

4

Gaines’s narrative strategy in *In My Father’s House* differs from *Of Love and Dust* in that he chooses an omniscient narrator rather than a first-person narrator. Hence the novel opens, not with Phillip, but rather with a stranger who arrives in St. Adrienne looking for him. The stranger, going by the name of Robert X, is seen and discussed by the entire community. He walks around St. Adrienne and is often seen behind Martin’s church or near his street. Though his reason for being in St. Adrienne is unknown, his gaunt face and wandering eyes imply that he is near death. When Robert X meets Elijah, the church pianist who rents a room in Phillip’s house, he finds out that there is to be a party at Phillip’s the following week. By opening with Robert X, rather than Martin, Gaines implements a gothic tone to frame Phillip’s presence. The younger man’s mysterious presence is ghost-like, a projection of an irreconcilable past. His fixation upon the physical structures Martin inhabits suggests that they are sites of public status whose private realities hover at the edge of narrative.

Hence, before Phillip Martin appears in the novel, Gaines has provided several instances where he is assessed and evaluated as a public figure. For example, when Elijah meets his friends at a local bar, Phillip’s party invites commentary. One of Elijah’s friends observes, “That whole thing’s over with.... He did some good work but’s it all over with now.”27 The effect of this is to situate Phillip as a man who creates public discourse; he is a man seen and talked about. The terms used by younger, more disillusioned blacks denote him as a figure of depletion, an icon of a moment just passed. But the time, just two years after the death of King when a leader of epic proportions is so deeply
longed for, has allowed Phillip to sustain enough of his public influence that he is perceived by an older constituency as effective.

The curiosity Robert X entertains concerning Phillip Martin indicates a deeper, more substantial drama than that of a civil rights leader whose popularity is on the wane. The novel's title intimates that an encounter of a different sort is at hand. Thus, when Robert X appears at Phillip's party (which we discover is to celebrate the coming demonstration at a white owner's department store), the shock of seeing him knocks the older man to the floor. Referring as it does to Christ's assertion of God's abundance of resources, In My Father's House is just as concerned with apportionment and depletion as its predecessor. It also recalls the parable of the prodigal son, a parable Christ relates in response to the Pharisees' notion that men of public status should not convene with men of lesser social worth. Phillip's collapse must be read, then, as the symptom of an abrupt encounter with his forgotten past: a time when he lacked the emotional resources to fulfill the role of father. However, the whites and middle class blacks at the party interpret his fall as the sign of overwork, the result of his public role. This misreading occurs at the novel's conceptual nexus: the public life of men, the transgressions that threaten to rupture that life, and the ability to find resources that can sufficiently incorporate transgression and reflection to create a flexible, but coherent, sense of self.

It is here that we must consider the importance of intimacy. What does intimacy mean for our purposes and how does it square with the terms that we have already set forth? Michael G. Cooke provides what is perhaps the most assiduous definition of intimacy:

> Intimacy . . . signalize[s] a condition in which the African-American protagonist (male or female, pugilist or philosopher, activist or ascetic) is depicted as realistically enjoying a sound and clear orientation toward the self and the world. It denotes a state of mind where one is, in Wordsworth's paradoxical phrase, "free to settle," or, in other words, comely and resolute in one's own being as well as sensitive and effective in dealing with social entities and forces.

As a man who lives a life that is energized by the public sphere, Phillip Martin is a figure for whom intimacy, or at least the search for it, is essential. For as Cooke observes, intimacy represents "a thorough involvement with the world and along with that a degree of immunity and superiority to sociopolitical shibboleths . . . a wider recognition of the universe" (Afro-American Literature, x). Moreover, Cooke's distinction between the "intimacy of gesture" in which Phillip has come to be engaged and the "full and unforced communication with the given, the available, and the conceivable in human experience in a particular time
and setting,” represents the journey he must undertake if he is to acquire a coherent sense of who he is. In many ways, Phillip is the logical result if Marcus Payne were to survive and take up a life devoted to social rather than political resistance, which would explain his preoccupation with transformation. Whereas Marcus, as self-centered youth, could only play out the role of the questing son (hence his relationship with Jim Kelly), Phillip seeks to fulfill the role of father. For him, his public role has familial importance because it attempts to link these two estranged positions.

Hence, the idea of having a party before the demonstration begs the question: what is being celebrated, empowerment in the present or the victories of the past? Objectified by his own hubris, Phillip sees Robert X and the shock of recognition becomes a moment of depletion. Byerman's description of the former as a “ghost” is apt here, for the gothic aspects of Phillip’s past take physical shape, rendering the present incoherent.29 What his presence articulates is that Phillip's apportionment—the physical and material splendor of his present life—is linked to his son's spiritual depletion. Indeed, the gothic overtones of In My Father's House intimate Gaines's concern that the public roles African American men assume inevitably diminish their spiritual resources. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, what often concerns Gaines's fictional protagonists most deeply is their desire to maintain or nurture kinship ties. This notion is worth our attention here because Phillip’s public status is fueled by the act of truncating memory, where the past is synonymous with his activism. The scene where Robert X stands before him calls for a deeper inquiry: what are the motivations for public life, and are those motivations foregrounded by the need to expunge the past?

The moment when Phillip falls illustrates, therefore, the contingent nature of identity. This is underscored by Gaines’s sense that Phillip’s single-mindedness leaves his self-concept vulnerable to collapse. His weakness, he notes in his “Conversation” with Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooten, the reason

he does not get up, is he let the liberal decide who ... he is. He let the liberal white decide who he is. They decided he was tired, and he accepted their decision without saying, “No, I’m not. This is my son.” That is why he failed.30

Phillip’s dilemma reminds us of Ellison's protagonist in that he is defined by others. Suddenly, “the Movement” is not enough, for Gaines insists that Phillip’s white political allies are

the sort of help he could go to get something moving like [voting], but they’re the same people who kept him on his back when he wanted to get his son.
That’s part of the scheme: We can help you to get a drink of water, we can have you sit at the counter, but we cannot help you to understand your son or your son to understand you. Our policies are not written that way. ("Conversation," 59).

This forces us to reassess the question Ellison poses in Chapter 21 in *Invisible Man*: could politics ever be an expression of love?; and to articulate its inverse: can love ever be an expression of one’s politics? Under such terms, Robert X’s arrival forces Phillip to reassess the meaning of his labor: is it a genuine desire to bring about change or is he running away from his past? Phillip looks at his house, the symbol of his achievement and observes:

He was proud of this house. He had worked hard for his family, his church, the people, and the movement, and he had been proud of that hard work. He thought he had done a good job, at least both black and white had told him so. But now, after seeing the boy in the house, after falling and not getting up, he had begun to question himself; What really was Phillip Martin, and what if anything had he really done? (*Father’s House*, 72)

If we are to ascertain the full nature of Phillip’s angst, we must consider here spiritual conversion. Phillip’s passage from sin to salvation, his journey from brutality to manhood, acquires such public currency that the personal crisis that produced his transformation assumes a lesser weight. The significance of this, as David O’Rourke insists, is that conversion “allows us to resolve immobilizing crisis in a mobilizing way and deal with potentially destructive forces in a creative way.” As an example of his being imbued with a new set of resources, Phillip’s civil rights activity is the creative embodiment of his “salvation.” But a problem arises when he inhabits a space where his spiritual mandate is a wholly public manifestation. This means that he must always demonstrate his salvation through acts of public display; activism becomes synonymous with spiritual coherence.

But Robert X’s presence leads Phillip to renew his conjugal ties and thus to confront the contingency of a public self. As the agent of change in St. Adrienne, the act of embracing his son is synonymous with his embattled past. However, his public status cannot support both initiatives. Thus, when he attempts to bail Robert X out of jail, the sheriff will comply with his request only if Phillip agrees to call off the demonstration. The past and present collide, not only because Gaines poses them as irreconcilable concepts, but also because they demand that Phillip manifest authority in two distinct conceptual spaces at once: one personal, the other public. It is important that it is Sheriff Nolan with whom Phillip must negotiate in order to get Robert X out of jail, for he
is the one individual positioned to understand how Phillip possesses the ability to transform his jail from a space of confinement and punishment to a space of resistance and social consciousness. Because Nolan and Phillip have known one another for most of their lives, the discussion between Phillip and Nolan provides us with a sense of the scope of Phillip's conversion:

As a young deputy Nolan had arrested Phillip several times for fighting. Twice he was picked up as a suspect in killings, but neither time was there enough proof against him. As the sheriff of St. Adrienne, Nolan had arrested him more than once for civil rights demonstrations. The two men had no love for each other; still there was no running hatred for each other either. Each felt the other was doing his work the best way he knew how, and both accepted the fact that there would be conflicts between them. (83)

When Phillip requests his son's release, Nolan sees it as an opportunity to reclaim the jail as a site of white supremacy and control. What was a form of antagonistic cooperation between the two men becomes a barter arrangement through which the sheriff recognizes that he can circumvent legal procedure.

Phillip's request is a necessary (albeit reluctant) move, an attempt to structure a space where he can converse with Robert X as father and not as public figure. Hence he bartered for his son using the only commodity at his disposal: his public role (and the scheduled demonstration against the storeowner, Chenal) as civil rights spokesman. What he fails to anticipate, however, is that Robert X—whose real name he cannot remember—has no investment in Phillip's life as an activist. Thus he cannot bring his persuasive skills to bear on their encounter.

When Robert X and Phillip finally get an opportunity to talk, the former accuses his father of "raping" his mother. Though Phillip denies it, citing his love for the younger man's mother, Johanna, he adheres to this interpretation of events. The boy accuses him of trying to pay off the crime when he recounts the three dollars Phillip offers. Phillip's tearful response is crucial to understanding his motivations—political and otherwise:

I was paralyzed. Paralyzed. Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn't have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn't move. I had arms, but I couldn't lift them up to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn't a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill—but not stand. Not be responsible. Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That's what kept me on that bed. Not 'cause I didn't want to get up. I wanted to get up more than anything in the world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had lived by for so long, and I wasn't strong enough to break them then. (102)
This statement corresponds with Phillip's recollection of the day Johanna and her children leave the Reno plantation. Before his first encounter with Robert X at his house, he has had a dream:

He could still see Johanna in the black overcoat and black hat waving her arms and calling to him. But why black? Why black? He had never known her to wear anything but the brightest colors when she was here. Why black now? He could still see the oldest boy at the tailgate of the wagon reaching out his small arms. But the other two children went on playing as if nothing was happening round them. He ran as hard as he could to catch them, but the wagon slowly and steadily moved farther and farther away. (53–54)

This dream of failed paternity must be juxtaposed with what actually transpired twenty-one years previous, but also considered in terms of how Phillip remembers it and the way memory and symbols form an interpretive confluence.

As he sits in his study, remembering the dream, Gaines's narrator calls our attention to a collage with John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy on the wall. And hanging “evenly with the first” collage is another one containing pictures of Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. That Gaines identifies the pictures as “collages” is an important detail, one that has deeper critical implications. Thought of in the most formal of terms, the photos as “collages” would represent a kind of visual dissensus, the “ultimate disaffection [of leaders] whose . . . choices don’t fit.” The collages fail to achieve this level of complexity; rather they create a consensual myth whose purpose is to truncate politics, protest, and history into a simplistic relation, one whose representational strategy somehow proposes that Douglass and Lincoln, for example, stand in political and social accord. This harmony likewise posits this visual “collaboration” as the means by which the successful enactment of African American citizenship was achieved. If we consider both sets of portraits more closely, we find that the African American leaders are positioned alongside white elected officials. One reading of this arrangement would be that African American leaders, whose authority derives from their ability to manifest a persuasive rhetorical presence, must work in concert with men whose authority is derived by law. But we can also read it as an imbalance of power. As such, it articulates the manner by which this iconographic arrangement of civil rights figures is finally a set of ciphers invested with false meaning. Indeed, if we look more closely at the collage of King and the Kennedys, what we find is that, in actuality, each represents the failure of the dream. Or perhaps, more precisely, each represents the dream rendered incomplete by violence. What this
suggests is that, like these men, Phillip is incapable of making the dream real, doomed to be trapped in the realm of a public dream-myth. Moreover, the dream of his failed fatherhood takes place in the midst of a failed public dream. That he remembers the dream in the midst of a veritable “pantheon” of heroes articulates the fact that his public life has inflections that are, at root, deeply personal.

We need, however, to understand the depth of Phillip’s disorientation. After remembering the dream, he looks at his Bible, which is turned to the fourteenth chapter of John. He begins to read, but he stops as he begins the third verse. The unread portion reads as follows: “... and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” This statement encompasses a promise of return, a fulfillment of longing. As we see in the next verse, the disciples are skeptical. They require evidence that they are in the presence of the Father, most notably the disciple Philip, who says, “Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.” As Phillip thinks about why he fell and did not get up, he turns back to the pictures on the wall and realizes, “These great men always gave him encouragement when he was troubled. In his heart he asked them now for guidance.” He realizes this before he prays, “quietly to the picture of Christ on the cross” (my emphasis). This is a pivotal moment in the novel, one that should help to clarify Phillip Martin’s dilemma. Like his biblical counterpart, Phillip relies on physical evidence, on icons, to maintain spiritual contact. Moreover, his first choice is to look to public men for guidance. His prayer is aimed at a representation of Christ’s liminal moment, an instance before the Resurrection, as if Gaines wants to suggest that Phillip’s “conversion” is one doomed to fail because it relies on idolatry rather than faith. Moreover, he seeks to refute the dream by bringing the force of his transformation to bear; but this is a misinterpretation of the dream. He reads the dream as a slightly revised version of the past, but in fact the dream is the call to interpret events in the present.

What lends such importance to these seemingly innocuous details is that Phillip’s entire career as a public figure is predicated on the moment that necessitates his conversion to a more spiritual life. In his interpretation of conversion experience, he links emotional apathy with civic activism. His comments to Robert X reveal that his public life has been devoted to avoiding immobility. While he is correct in his assertion that racial segregation and discrimination divested him, like other black men, of the emotional resources necessary to maintain his family, the course he chooses to overdetermine political activism and thus become a man of action comes at the expense of spiritual growth.
Though his notion that family matters are finally political is a correct assessment, Phillip Martin has inadvertently chosen the wrong path to reconcile social justice and filial responsibility.

5

The remainder of the novel consists of Phillip's quest for reconciliation. This results in an attempt to recreate the conditions which produced his original "conversion." Like Ellison's hero, Phillip must search for a way to conjoin his life into a coherent narrative which will lead him towards the conclusion that he is "nobody but himself." Before he can do this, however, he must journey into the past to reconstruct his past life and connect it with the present in order to integrate these disparate parts into a unified identity. The key figure in this quest is his old friend, Chippo Simon. Chippo lives across the river in Baton Rouge, which Gaines suggests is St. Adrienne's antithesis: a gothic underworld of gambling establishments, juke joints, and tiny cafes. In a manner reminiscent of Orpheus, Phillip must venture into this place to find the lost portions of his past, the self he left behind. Gaines's use of an omniscient narrator suggests, then, that the novel is not concerned with Phillip's ability to tell a story. Rather, it is concerned with the ability to recover an understanding of the importance of listening. As "community spokesman," Phillip cannot be the one to tell his tale, for his voice is that of civil rights leader and preacher. His search is for another voice, one that can articulate his longing for emotional agency and intimacy.

Phillip's search for Chippo leads him through Baton Rouge, where he meets individuals who direct him toward his spiritual goal by helping him confront important issues. He stops in a cafe for coffee and there meets an older man, a preacher like himself. The man is poor and, unlike Phillip, he is a "public figure" only because the cafe owner considers him a nuisance. He differs from Phillip also because he is faith and love personified, even in the face of rejection and poverty. Later, he meets a younger man just returned from Vietnam, who is trying to recruit other men to carry out a violent resistance against capitalist America. He values "bullets and fire" over Phillip's adherence to non-violence. Here Gaines evokes the muddle of agendas that the seventies brought to black leadership after King's death. Thus, Phillip Martin's journey into the past likewise leads him back toward the substance of what gave his life as an activist meaning; he is searching for the renewal of kinship at two levels: with his son and the community. The last figure from his past is Adeline Toussant, a former lover. Though she may be seen as the temptress, what is more important—
and appropriate—is her assertion that she has a very different sense from his of their time together, and thus he finds that historical narrative is neither fixed nor absolute. Though he dismisses her interpretation of what has transpired between them out of a need to maintain a sense of his power with women, her resistance to Phillip’s version of their shared history suggests the limitations of Phillip’s masculine influence, a fact he refuses to acknowledge outwardly. However, Phillip’s quest for his son is motivated by the sense that his patriarchal influence is extremely limited. The invitation Adeline extends to Phillip is a nod to the past and thus it does not offer the resources he needs to resolve his crisis of identity in either the present or the future.

When Chippo finally arrives, Phillip asks to hear about Johanna. Reluctantly, Chippo tells the tale, much of which he has heard from a storekeeper in San Francisco. Phillip is reminded that Robert X’s real name is Etienne and that Johanna never stopped loving him. The story also relates the source of Etienne’s spiritual malaise. The storekeeper tells him that Etienne has turned his room into a “crypt” after his brother goes to prison for murdering the man who raped their sister. Besieged with guilt that he himself did not kill his sister’s attacker, Etienne goes into a state of hibernation. The family lives in an apartment in the basement of a three-story building; thus this hibernation has Faulknerian overtones. Entombed in guilt, the only way for Etienne to “recover his manhood” is by killing Phillip.37

Chippo recalls that the root of the problem lies in the tremendous burden placed on Etienne by Johanna:

He was the man of the house. The man of the house. She told it to him that day he left from here. She told it to him right here in front of me. When you didn’t come out of Tut’s house that day, she told him that till you did come back to them he was go’n be the man of the house. She took him by the hand, looking straight in his face—a scared, confused little boy. I told her it wasn’t right. I told her he wasn’t but a chap himself, and it wasn’t right. I told there’d be other men, and she oughtn’t force this burden on him. But she didn’t hear a word I said. (194)

Coherence is at issue here on several levels. When Phillip’s and Johanna’s “family” disintegrates, she makes Etienne into a surrogate partner, but his manhood is conditional, contingent on Phillip’s return. This leads to the annihilation of his masculinity because he can neither protect her nor replace Phillip as a lover. When Etienne comforts his sister after the rape, he compromises his role as “man of the house.” His filial response to the crisis is correct but his figurative status as lover and protector make this response inappropriate. Antoine’s decision to kill the rapist is an instance of self-apportionment, the elements of which are of greater substance than what Etienne receives from
Johanna. When Etienne visits him in prison, he realizes a shift in power has occurred. “When [Antoine] pulled that trigger,” Chippo relates, “then he was the man. His sister, the way she looked at him, let him know that he was the man. Even Johanna. Even Etienne himself let him know he was the man” (198).

When Antoine is released from prison, he and Justine move to New York, pursuing a symbolic journey eastward that erases the familial past. Antoine and Justine choose to be “dead” to the rest of the family, a choice which voices their opposition to the incestual nature of Etienne's and Johanna's relationship. The east represents an opportunity to begin again: for Antoine and Justine as a coherent family unit, and for Etienne to renew his depleted manhood. As a result, however, the family collapses into incoherence. Etienne's search for the father originates as an attempt to “slay the father,” but torn between attempting to free himself from Oedipal conflict and recovering his own identity, he is locked in stasis, the anti-hero trapped in an incoherent state. Chippo's story provides the meaning for Phillip's dream: the son who longs to embrace him (if only to kill him) and the two children who ignore his presence altogether. Chippo tells him to forget the past, but Phillip responds:

I went to religion to forget it. I prayed and prayed and prayed to forget it. I tried to wipe out everything in my past, make my mind blank, start all over. I thought the good work I was doing with the church, with the people, would make up for all the things I had done in the past. Till one day I looked cross my living room. (201)

He realizes that his “fall” in his living room is the rupture of a mythic reality. His ministerial life is called into question because, as the young Vietnam veteran asserts, the civil rights movement has failed to reconcile the differences between fathers and sons.

In My Father's House ends when Alma, Phillip's wife, tells him, “We just go'n have to start again.” I want to cite this at the outset in order to begin to isolate the most important aspects of Gaines's authorial intentions. At one level, Phillip's public role is ruptured because he has been stripped of his title as president of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee. However, this negative circumstance is actually the means for Phillip's transcendence. Because he has formulated his entire career as a public figure on notions of the past, indeed, making the past an idol to whom he bows, Phillip uses memory as a guide for his action in the present. Thus Alma's response to Phillip when he announces to her, “I'm lost,” is a statement invested solely in things present, a signal for him to follow.

However, we need to consider the substance of Phillip's remark.
Faced with an instance where he must reassess his life as a public figure, Phillip's greatest challenge is to see Etienne, who commits suicide by jumping off a bridge, as an anomaly he can no longer control. Phillip's deep sense of guilt has made his public life devoted to making himself worthy for his son's return. While this is not in itself a transgression, what makes it so is that he engages in a paradigm of leadership that requires him to construct the past as an idol. He chooses to do this rather than adopt a new posture, one that would allow him to articulate the connection between kinship and political activism. The failed paradigm nullifies this relation, and insists instead upon the relationship between civil rights and activism. This means that Phillip works at cross-purposes to his own rhetoric which, after all, is formulated upon notions of endurance. As he relates to Chippo, his memory remains fixed on that time when he lacked the ability to move:

I was telling my boy today what keep us apart is a paralysis we inherited from slavery. Paralysis kept me on that bed that day he knocked on that door. Paralysis kept me on that floor Saturday when I shoulda got up and told the people who he was. I thought fifteen years ago when I found religion I had overthrown my paralysis. But it's still there, Chippo. How do you get rid of it? How do you shake it off? (202)

Phillip's need for intimacy offers the means for him to construct a more viable public role. His problem has been one of attempting to accumulate the wrong kinds of resources. Thus, Alma's recognition that she and Phillip are the key, as parents, to a new paradigm is likewise her assertion that resources yet exist to accomplish his task. Alma also allows us to reassess Phillip's earlier announcement that

Love is the only thing. Understanding the only thing. Persistence, the only thing. Getting up tomorrow, trying again, the only thing. Keep on pushing, the only thing. (37)

Phillip begins with love and ends with conflict. Though this rhetorical posture appears to offer the potential for positive results, it actually obscures success because it posits proliferation over process. This rhetorical “stockpiling” serves an emotional purpose, drawing as it does on the sermonic mode. It fails, however, in its political goal of rendering the confrontation with Chenal as the alteration of a community's impulse to act against itself. Thus, the achievement of intimacy is subordinated to political confrontation.

But here we need to return to the idea of conversion, for by doing so we can see that Phillip Martin is an allegorical figure who forces us to reconsider the political climate of the seventies. As David O'Rourke suggests, conversion
literally means a kind of turning . . . a turning from the road we are on to another. It is not a minor turning, but one that comes about for reasons that seem to be running us more than we run them and to a new way that affects the whole of our life. ("Experience of Conversion," 9)

O’Rourke insists that conversion is not a singular event. Rather it is an instance of great complexity. Thus, he argues, conversion is “more complex than it is often perceived. The complexity is to be found principally in the fact that conversion occurs in several stages.” This observation has special relevance to our inquiry into Phillip Martin, for as both convert and activist he makes the connection between his earlier “paralysis” and his public role as civil rights leader. This conflicts, however, with his role as spiritual leader. As such, he must lead by faith; he must manifest a persona imbued with limitless resources, even when those resources appear to be depleted.

Herein lies the problem. Phillip’s misconceptions regarding spiritual conversion intimate the reason for his difficulty. His failure of faith is a failure to grasp the complexity of conversion. O’Rourke outlines three stages of conversion, which he refers to as the “noisy phase,” the “quiet phase,” and the “integrated phase” (10). Phillip Martin, community activist, the loud voice calling others to action, remains locked in this first mode of conversion, which “begins with the inner conflict in search of resolution and surfaces in the frequently ebullient change that we commonly call a conversion.” Consider his statement toward the end of the novel:

I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin. I was an animal. [God] changed me to a man. He straightened my back. He raised my head. He gave me feelings, compassion, made me responsible for my fellow man. My back wasn’t straightened before He straightened it. My eyes stayed on the ground. I took everything I could from my fellow man, and I didn’t give him nothing back. (211)

And thus, Phillip concludes:

I woulda looked at my son going by the house, and I woulda forgotten him—if it wasn’t for Him. But He changed me, and I can’t forget my son. I can’t forget my son, young lady. I can’t ignore my son no more. That’s why I say He owed me my son. Once He made me a human being. He owed me my son. (212)

Phillip’s problem is that Etienne’s departure prevents him from resolving fully the inner conflict O’Rourke describes. His activism is motivated by the desire for penance on the one hand and the notion of earthly reward on the other. Moreover, it relies on public displays of demonstrative energy. Both of these signal Phillip’s transition from one
form of social visibility to another. After his conversion, his role as leader continues to be grounded in his sense of superiority:

I've taken my fellow man by the hand and led him the way you lead a small child: led him to that courthouse, led him to the stores, led him to that bus station... But I asked nobody to do a thing till I had done it first. I was ready to get the first blow, what I've received many many times. But I kept going, kept going. (211-12)

But he has failed at the more difficult task of reflecting on his life. He can only accomplish this by moving beyond the public sphere. As O'Rourke notes, the “quiet phase” is a time of reflection, of withdrawal, a time for making sense of what has happened. It is a time for interiorization, for moving the choice of a new direction in life from the sphere of emotions and enthusiasm to the center of the person's being. This time of quiet and withdrawal is an integral part of the conversion process. For some, this phase is seen as the loss of conversion, and the attempt to prevent the move from visible enthusiasm to quiet is seen as a religious duty. (“Experience of Conversion,” 10)

Clearly, Phillip Martin is entering this phase of his conversion experience. It is a liminal moment, but one that he resists because his religious orientation associates public action with the maintenance of the conversion experience. His confusion as to his future course and his feelings of rejection arise from his failure to see conversion as an ongoing process. Like Ellison's hero, who evolves to a point where he can reflect on his experience and integrate those reflections in the form of a written text, Phillip must make the transition from shouting to solitude. Only then can he move to the final stage, the integrated phase, where, as O'Rourke suggests, the individual has integrated the substance of the conversion into the rest of his or her being. The period of retreat and withdrawal has provided the time to make sense of what has happened, to integrate the change of conversion into the person's history and life, and to form that synthesis of all these parts that comes as its result. (10)

And, in what should surely remind us of invisible man's insistence that his hibernation is a "preparation," O'Rourke observes that the convert, upon entering the integrated phase is prepared to enter again into the community in a more active way. But, this time the activity comes, not from the overflow of emotional energy that results from the resolution of conflict, but from the convert's convictions. No longer is he insisting that any and all in his circle listen to what has happened to him, but rather he is offering to tell them who he now is and what he believes. (10)
Like Ellison’s hero, Phillip Martin’s public life is not over. As Beverly Ricord informs him, he still has much to do. However, the novel’s conclusion intimates that he will do his work differently; his life as activist may give way to another life, one aimed at leading other people to a new sense of possibility. Though he has been relieved of his duties as president of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee, he still has his church. Like invisible man’s hole, Phillip’s church offers a space for him to renew his depleted psyche. I want also to return, if only momentarily, to his office. It, too, represents a space of transformation. However, it cannot serve him as shrine. The pictures of Douglass, Washington, Lincoln, King, and the Kennedys are not idols; they represent “images of kin.” Like theirs, Phillip’s life as an activist is characterized by conflict and failure. But here, he can use them as touchstones of the real, not as mythic figures; they can help him reference his own experience. More important, the African American figures in particular offer him images of self-made men whose lives were devoted to human agency. Lincoln and the Kennedys offer images of public martyrs, which in and of themselves offer little except that they can point him toward the ultimate martyr: Christ. For what differentiates the latter from the images of the former is not His death on the cross, but the resurrection that follows it. Alma’s call for Phillip to “start again” is thus her awareness that falls from public grace of the type Phillip has experienced are ultimately tests of faith. In a more integrated state of being, Phillip will learn to collaborate, not only with Alma, but with others who share his concerns. But as O’Rourke suggests, the liminal phase in which we find him at novel’s end is a necessary step toward a new way to read—and thus give voice to—his life’s concerns.

6

Taken together, Of Love and Dust and In My Father’s House represent Gaines’s extended rumination on the role of memory in the individual’s transformation. It is necessary, however, to locate these novels within their regional context. For one might argue that those who challenge the status quo in Gaines’s Louisiana are either killed like Marcus or stripped of all desire to live like Etienne. Or one might argue further that they end up like Jim Kelly and Phillip Martin, locked in ambiguity. To be sure, Kelly and Martin find themselves at the periphery of their communities, having lost the status they accrued via the conventions of their respective settings. But what makes their experiences of a conceptual piece is their realization that memory has prevented them from constituting fresh space in which to manifest proactive identities. As we have seen, both men find themselves in liminal circumstances. For
Kelly, this requires a physical break from the Hebert plantation that allows him to conjoin memory and voice, but not to locate his narration in a particular place and thus articulate his plans for the future. For Phillip Martin there is the need to embrace solitude, to loose himself from the past even as he integrates it into his experience. Phillip must learn to accept Christ's injunction that “the first shall be last.”

At novel's end, he can only articulate his inability to site himself.

One way to read this liminality on the part of Gaines's protagonists is to remember that they are Louisianans. Though both endure transformations that leave them with the task of relocating themselves within the community, they represent a more pervasive notion. Both embrace resistance as a vehicle of identity and both undergo conversion experiences that loose them from paralyzing circumstances. However, neither finds his turn of fate a guarantee of either safety or status. Nor can they utilize memory unless they are also willing to tell their stories. To do otherwise is to fall back into a static mode in which their status only appears to be secure. In these instances, the temptation to remember must be staved off, requiring these characters to use labor as a way of blocking access to the past.

What Gaines suggests here is that the Louisiana past, as these characters experience it, can either restrain action or serve as a resource to an integrated state of selfhood. In allegorical terms, Gaines's characters represent the kind of labor necessary for Louisiana to become a more inclusive, democratic space for black and white alike. While both Jim Kelly and Phillip Martin endure soul-destroying losses, they are also literary gestures toward an alternative paradigm for understanding black life in Louisiana. That Gaines chooses to render the future in ambiguous terms for both characters intimates that he eschews the impulse to construct Louisiana as a polemical space where its problems are easily solved or where black and white represent good and evil, respectively. Rather, he depicts it as an evolutionary space; the arrival of integration will not, Gaines suggests, transform Louisianans as much as it will put their lives on a different course. Hence, like Kelly and Martin, Louisiana undergoes a conversion from one form of community to another.

Both these novels posit slavery as the force which continues to effect Southern identity. If slavery is analogous to a Godless circumstance, a road to ruin, then the South’s transformation begins with the Civil War. However, as Gaines’s rendering of conversion as a complex, multiple-staged event denotes, the violent changes brought on by the war gave way to a phase that ran from Reconstruction till the 1950s, when Jim Crow conventions normalized relations between blacks and whites. A character like Jim Kelly represents the singular need to break out of a
repressive circumstance. Set in the 1940s, *Of Love and Dust* works out the beginnings of what would become, in the next decade, the protest against the degradation of Jim Crow.

In chronological terms, Phillip Martin represents the "integrative" phase of Southern conversion. He is successful at transforming the symbolic sites where Jim Crow flourished. However, what his character calls us to recognize is the necessity for transformation to be continuous. His personal movement into the quiet phase of conversion, the need to "start again," proposes that Louisianans, and indeed all Southerners, must embrace their failures as part of a coherent process which, far from insuring utopian outcomes, will merely allow them to create a more collaborative narrative posture. The ambiguity surrounding Phillip Martin at the end of *In My Father's House* represents a kind of catholicity. His gothic past has ruptured the present as he previously understood it; conversely, this is also the exact moment when he can break free from the past, when he stumbles upon the necessary resources to establish relationships oriented toward the future. In this regard, Gaines's depiction of an activist with a tangled past asserts again the need to understand the relationship between freedom and literacy. For what Phillip Martin acquires via the necessity to integrate past and present is a new way to read signs. Like Ellison's hero, who chooses reflection and discovers that it is an act of resistance in and of itself, Phillip's movement into a reflective mode signals a new approach to activism. As preacher, Phillip stands as the bridge between the sacred and secular worlds. Though his status in the latter is diminished, the former offers an instance of infinite resources.

What this means is that these two novels must be seen as a celebration of the task of transforming the South. Though his fiction often depicts brutal circumstances, I would argue that, like Ellison, Gaines believes the South (and thus, the nation as a whole) is an undiscovered country. The past is therefore a necessary, albeit precarious, resource and Gaines's fictions argue for an open-endedness as it pertains to the South. As Gaines related in an interview with Charles Rowell:

Faulkner says something like the past ain't dead; it ain't even passed. ... I don't know that you can escape the past. If it were possible, I would have escaped it myself, because Louisiana is definitely not only my past but my present also. I believe I, myself, and my writing are good examples to support that observation that you can't escape your past. There is a difference between living in the past and trying to escape it. If you do nothing but worship the past you are quite dead, I believe. But if you start running and trying to get away from the past. ... It will run you mad, or kill you in some way or the other. So you really don't get away. It's there and you live it. 49
Hence, neither Jim Kelly nor Phillip Martin is a figure who finds a way to escape the past. Rather, they are characters who discern new ways to use the past. As Gaines's remarks above suggest, the individual is faced with the need to find a way to use the past rather than discard it. Kelly and Martin, though flawed in character, are also the sign that the process of transformation requires acts of memory brought to life via the act of witnessing. Though the story may be one that brings sadness and confusion, it is finally what must be brought to bear to insure that change is everlasting.