BRANNON COSTELLO

PLANTATION AIRS

RACIAL PATERNALISM

and

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF CLASS IN SOUTHERN FICTION, 1945–1971

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In Ernest J. Gaines’s *Of Love and Dust* (1967), narrator Jim Kelly relates a tale of race and class tensions on a post–World War II Louisiana plantation. The central conflict involves the struggle among Marshall Hebert, a wealthy planter, Sidney Bonbon, his Cajun overseer, and Marcus Payne, a poor young African American man. Hebert has bonded Marcus out of jail to kill Bonbon, who has violated the boundaries of his appointed role by blackmailing the planter, stealing from him, and falling in love with an African American laborer. In one of the novel’s crucial scenes, Marcus demonstrates his disdain for the traditional boundaries on the plantation. When Hebert reenters his home after conferring with Marcus in the yard, Marcus simply follows. Bishop, a longtime servant to the Hebert family, tells narrator Jim Kelly with horror, “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). Jim does not fail to grasp the significance of Bishop’s dismay: “Bishop wanted me to understand that any black person who would stick his foot in a door that slavery built would do almost anything” (216).

Marcus’s transgression quickly calls to mind other famous doorway confrontations in southern literature, most notably Ab Snopes’s rug-ruining march in “Barn Burning,” Thomas Sutpen’s threshold rejection in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and, less renowned but perhaps just as significant, overseer Troy Flavin’s entrance to his wedding to Dabney Fairchild via the side door that leads to the fields in Welty’s *Delta Wedding*. Like those earlier works, *Of Love and Dust* takes up the issue of the boundaries and borders that divide groups and individuals in the rural South. Gaines explores the ways in which racial paternalism divides white and black laborers into rigidly stratified and opposing communities, as well as the ways in which breaking out of the paternalist system requires violating
the boundaries of those communities. However, Gaines also suggests that stepping across boundaries is not enough, and he examines the possible new models of interracial community and political action made possible in the wake of paternalism’s collapse.

Gaines’s novel is set in 1948, and although Hebert’s plantation has begun to feel the combined effects of the New Deal and World War II, in many ways the life of the plantation remains unchanged. Planters, Cajuns, and poor African American sharecroppers coexist uneasily and, for the most part, separately. According to Jim, “The plantation (or what was left of the plantation now) had all its crop far back in the field. The front land was for the sharecroppers. The Cajuns had the front-est and best land, and the colored people (those who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land. The plantation land was farther back still, almost to the swamps” (26). Segregation prevails in most social settings: when Jim gets a Coke after a long day on the tractor, he observes, “A colored person couldn’t go through the back of the store to the yard. He had to enter the yard from the big gate” (84). Though he contemplates one day making a stand for equality, his exhausting labor deprives him of the energy and motivation for such a bold gesture: “Either I was too thirsty to do it, or after I had been working in the field all day I was just too tired and just didn’t care” (43).

Like segregation, paternalism survives on the plantation and encourages its African American workers to see the social system as natural and inevitable. Most of Hebert’s employees remain committed to the ideals of paternalism, and they believe that he does as well. Indeed, he does his best to look the part; his clothes offer an appearance of consistency that his actions subvert: “Winter and summer he wore a seersucker suit and a panama hat” (83). Hebert’s refusal to acknowledge the changing of the seasons in his wardrobe choices indicates that his clothing has less to do with comfort and more to do with promoting and maintaining a particular idea of himself as a planter in the classic paternalist mold. His attempts are largely successful: nearly all of his workers see Hebert’s bonding Marcus out of jail to work for him as a favor done for Miss Julie Rand, an elderly woman who was Hebert’s longtime cook and who raised Marcus when his mother died and his father abandoned him. Rand herself tells Jim, “That white man been good to me. I went to him ’cause I
didn't have nowhere else to turn” (14). When Jim fears for Marcus’s survival on the plantation, he thinks, “I was hoping that when his trial came up they would lock him in prison, but after thinking about it I knew that wasn't going to happen. Not after Miss Julie Rand had given Marshall Hebert’s people forty years of her life” (171). Even when Jim and others begin to suspect that Hebert has other motivations for freeing Marcus, Bishop, the most stalwart defender of Hebert’s good name, insists that his master acts strictly out of paternalistic oblige: “He got him out for her. . . He got him out 'cause she came there crying. He didn’t know that boy from Adam” (218). Bishop and the other older folk on the plantation, in particular, cling to the ideals of paternalism as a way of making their lives make sense, as Karen J. Carmean has observed (52). Thus, Bishop reacts with understandable panic when, as he tries to keep the door of the big house shut to Marcus, Hebert orders him, the faithful retainer, to “get out” and, finally, even strikes him. Bishop pleads, “Your people say I can stay here. Your people liked me. They say long as I was a good boy I could stay here. They say if I looked after y’all and I was a good boy, this house was my home till I died” (236). Bishop’s greatest sorrow results from his belief that he has failed the paternalist order—the same order that has caused him to continue thinking of himself as a “boy” well into his old age. Jim tells us, “He was praying for Marshall and he was praying for the house. He was asking the old people who had died to forgive him for letting them down” (237). Paternalism has so firmly taken root in the psyche of many of the plantation’s African Americans that all Marshall Hebert must really do is dress the part; he lives the dream that Flem Snopes could never quite achieve. His hat and suit become a screen upon which his workers can project the fantasies they have been conditioned to believe in.

Paternalism also helps to divide black and white workers exploited by the plantation system. Hebert makes this explicit when he tells Marcus, who is furious at the absolute terms of his bondage to the planter, that he should direct his rage at Bonbon instead: “The man killing you in the field out there” (188). Their close identification with Hebert and the ideal associated with his status as plantation owner leads most of the African American workers to despise the Cajuns and to see them as the root of all the trouble in the area. For instance, Jim notes that Bishop seems
uncomfortable when he and other African Americans gather to discuss mounting tensions, not least because of the familiar way in which Jim calls Hebert “Marshall” instead of “Mr. Marshall.” Says Jim, “Bonbon was a poor Cajun, and he [Bishop] would have talked about Bonbon all day. But things were a little different when they were about Mr. Marshall” (218). Even after Hebert’s duplicity becomes apparent, Aunt Margaret blames the turmoil on the Cajuns (280). As Shane Bernard observes in *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, Cajuns historically held a marginalized status as whites-but-not-whites; according to Bernard, the perception of Cajuns as “white trash” extends as far back as the nineteenth century. He cites a post–Civil War journalist who “referred to them as ‘good representatives of the white trash,’ reviled even by local blacks as ‘Acadian niggers’” (xvii). Carl Brasseaux also notes that the term *Cajun* signified “white trash” for most Americans in the late nineteenth century (104). Gaines clearly indicates that these attitudes have lingered: Marcus thinks of Bonbon as “not even a solid white man, but a bayou, catfish-eating Cajun” (57). In their distaste for Bonbon, Bishop, Aunt Margaret, and others confirm Zora Neale Hurston’s assertion in “The ‘Pet Negro’ System” that, as a way of surviving in a racist society, southern African Americans strive “to be associated with the quality and consequently are ashamed to admit that they are working for ‘strainers’” (596). Hurston also notes that “class-consciousness of Negroes is an angle to be reckoned with in the South,” and she argues, “If ever it came to the kind of violent showdown the orators hint at,” the pets and their white patrons would protect each other so that only the “‘pore white trash’ and the ‘stray niggers’” would be caught in the crossfire (596). Hurston’s prediction supplies an apt description of this novel’s conclusion.

However, the ostensibly placid surface of the rigidly segregated plantation belies the abundance of complicated interactions and exchanges occurring across race and class boundaries. Though Bishop treats it as an earth-shattering aberration, Marcus’s step across Hebert’s threshold is only the most overt of these exchanges. Gaines finds the hope for change in these violations of the established order, and he explores them through his narrator Jim Kelly, whose complicated relationships with both Bonbon and Marcus lead him to a new understanding of the relationship between race, class, and power. Jim has a particular aptitude for sens-
ing these tensions because of his unique status on the plantation. Unlike Bishop or the older African American workers, Jim did not grow up on the plantation; he has lived there for only three years, since responding to Hebert’s request for workers who could “handle tractors” (147). Jim’s expertise puts him in a unique position: he has more responsibility and authority than the other field hands, a closer relationship with Bonbon, and, thus, a certain degree of privilege and protection. Gaines suggests the relationship between mechanical savvy and privilege when Jim notes, “I drive the tractor and I have an umbrella. . . . The ones walking behind that trailer got the mean part of it” (18). Significantly, Jim nearly always describes the sun that his umbrella protects him from as white, thus suggesting that his skill affords him a certain safety from the realities of the racist power structure. In two notable examples, he describes the sun as “white, small, and still strong” (38), as “white as snow, hot as fire” (82).

Further, Gaines has noted that, as the plantation system in Louisiana began to embrace mechanization, Cajuns and other whites, not African Americans, tended to use the machines, and that these machines gave Cajuns an advantage over African American farmers that further divided the two groups, a subject that Gaines explores both in this novel and in *A Gathering of Old Men*. According to Gaines, “My people had been slaves on the place and they had become sharecroppers when the owner of the plantation turned it over to sharecroppers. But then the Cajuns became sharecroppers as well. They got the better land. They got better machinery, and they produced more, and a lot of the blacks moved out because they could not compete” (“An Interview with Ernest Gaines” 186–87).

Thus, as an African American tractor driver supervised by a Cajun overseer and employed by a white plantation owner, Jim occupies a complicated position. Erik Olin Wright’s concept of “contradictory class locations” helps to explain his unusual status on the plantation. Though Wright primarily directs his analysis toward fractures in the nebulously defined “middle class,” we may usefully employ the concept in Jim’s case as well. According to Wright, “if we want class structure to help explain class consciousness, class formation and class conflict, then we need some way of understanding the class-relevant divisions within the employee population” (19). Wright argues that the “possession of skills or expertise” (19) contributes to these divisions. Because of the scarcity of these skills,
employees who possess high levels of skills/expertise are potentially in a privileged appropriation location within exploitation relations” (22). Jim’s abilities would indeed have been necessary for a postwar plantation. During and after World War II, historian Bruce J. Schulman notes, “the proportion of southern farms operating tractors skyrocket[ed], [and]… the new machinery diffused rapidly through the Cotton Belt, so that by the end of the war decade, the traditional southern mule farmer had all but disappeared from the regional landscape” (102). Though Jim works primarily with corn, not cotton, it seems that the same trend holds generally true on Hebert’s plantation; while Jim elsewhere notes that Hebert has plenty of hands around, he has few capable of handling the new technology and must advertise for qualified workers. Although Jim does not use his unique position to appropriate any more capital than his peers, as Wright suggests experts do, it does afford him other advantages. In addition to the better working conditions that he experiences, Jim finds that his skill results in a close but cautious relationship with Bonbon. According to Jim, their relationship began “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” (147). Bonbon does more than simply trust Jim with additional responsibility; he trusts him with revelations about his family and personality. Jim reports, “[He] told me things about himself, things about his family—things he never told anybody 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” (147). Jim elaborates on the close connection between his skills and their relationship: “Bonbon needed somebody to talk to just like anybody else needs somebody to talk to. And since I knew all about trucks and tractors, I was the person he chose” (148). Thus Jim’s status as an expert distinguishes him from the other African American workers; it sets him literally and symbolically above them and makes him worthy of Bonbon’s confidence.

However, Jim’s expertise does not always work to his benefit. Marcus initially distrusts the older man, referring to him repeatedly as a “white-mouth,” a loaded term indicating that though Jim’s skin may be black, he gives voice to the ideology of those in power (6, 24, 46). Admittedly, Marcus’s reservations have some validity. Jim often feels compelled to preserve
the status quo of the plantation: he tells Marcus, “We don’t want any trouble on this plantation, hear?” (122). Moreover, though Jim generally has a positive, respectful relationship with the other African American laborers, at times his unique job keeps him from communicating clearly with them. When he tries to speak with Aunt Margaret, who cares for Bonbon’s daughter, Tite, “the tractor was making so much noise she could hardly hear me” (180). Perhaps Marcus realizes that Jim’s privileged status means that when their interests come into conflict, Jim can use his limited power against him. For instance, Jim expresses his frustration with Marcus’s frequent disruptions of plantation life by forcing the inexperienced hand to work as hard as a longtime veteran: says Jim, “I didn’t have any pity on him. I drove the tractor just like I was supposed to drive it when three people were working back there” (173). Most significantly, his expertise keeps him from having to choose sides in the ultimate confrontation between Marcus and Bonbon. On the day that Marcus plans to leave with Bonbon’s wife, Jim notes, “Just as we knocked off, the tractor went dead on me. My heart jumped in my throat because I didn’t know how long it was going to take me to get the tractor fixed. . . . I started to leave with them [the field workers] and come back to fix the tractor later, but I told myself that fixing the tractor was my work just like driving it” (269). Further, Jim says that he wants to get back to the quarter so that he can tell Marcus he admires him: “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 in my throat 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” (270). His profession of admiration notwithstanding, Jim still chooses to align himself with the interests of the plantation status quo, represented by the tractor, instead of with the other laborers who want to return from work before the fight between Bonbon and Marcus. Jim’s expertise, and the obligations to Hebert’s interests that come along with it, keep him from getting back to the quarter and perhaps preventing Bonbon from killing the rebellious Marcus. Indeed, the fact that Jim says that he told himself that “fixing the tractor was [his] work” suggests that the apparent freedom that his expertise gives him has also caused him to internalize the values of the plantation. He needs no overseer because he keeps himself under surveillance; in this respect, Jim’s position high on the tractor
seat seems less a position of exaltation than of perpetual examination. As with Arvay Henson in Seraph on the Suwanee, Jim is under constant surveillance in a manner that recalls Foucault’s claim that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power. . . ; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (470). Thus Jim’s privileges come with a price; his expertise and close relationship with Bonbon separate him from other black workers and put him in a position of panoptical surveillance.

However, if Jim avoids committing to Marcus’s rebellion, he does not ultimately remain content on the plantation, either. In fact, at the novel’s end, he rejects Hebert’s gesture of paternalism and abandons the plantation, and I would suggest that by examining his relationships with Bonbon and Marcus, we may best understand how Jim comes to realize the necessity of breaking away from traditional plantation race relations. Marcus is a self-reliant city dweller who has little connection to the myths and memories of the plantation; further, since he was likely born in the late 1920s, he has spent most of his life in a South in which the New Deal, and, more recently, World War II have offered increased opportunities for individualism to African Americans. As Harvard Sitkoff argues, although the New Deal may not have delivered on all of its promises, its “reform spirit . . . helped create a psychological climate in which black southerners and their allies could struggle with expectations of success” (133). No surprise, then, that Marcus has few illusions about the supposedly selfless paternalism of elite planters like Marshall Hebert. Even before he completely understands his benefactor’s plans, he is suspicious. Near the end of the novel, he shares with Jim a story from his past that helps explain his reluctance to believe in paternalism. In his early teens, Marcus got a job in a parking lot, where his supervisor, an older African American man named Big Red, extorted a dollar from him every day. He seeks help from the parking lot manager, but Big Red doubles his fee when he finds out that Marcus has gone over his head. When Marcus goes back to the boss, the boss repeats his earlier advice but refuses to tell Big Red himself. Says Marcus, “I didn’t tell Big Red anything because now I saw what was going on. Big Red was his number one nigger, and he didn’t care what Big Red did” (250). Marcus snaps and attacks Big Red, and he finds the same system at work in jail: a black man named Cadillac
pummels Marcus for having no cigarettes. Marcus notes, “The next morn-
ing the jailer looked at me all bruised, but he didn’t say a thing. He even
gived Cadillac more food than he gived the rest of us. Cadillac was his
nigger just like Big Red was the other white man’s nigger” (251–52). These
experiences inspire Marcus to look for salvation, or at least survival, in a
fiercely held individualism. Though Jim protests that “they got the world
fixed where you have to work with other people,” Marcus insists, “When
they let me out of jail, I promised myself I was go’n look out only for
myself; and I wasn’t go’n expect no more from life than what I could do
for myself” (253). Marcus’s experiences with Big Red and Cadillac are
significant because they demonstrate the hollowness of the lofty rhetoric
that figures racial paternalism and the “pet Negro” system as emerging
from benevolent noblesse oblige on the part of selfless, wealthy aristocrats. His perception that the jail and the plantation are but two versions
of the same institution anticipates Houston Baker’s argument that the
southern plantation was for African Americans essentially a forerunner
of the modern prison-industrial complex, both institutions serving the
ultimate goal of “black or African immobilization” (84). Indeed, when
Hebert bonds Marcus out of jail to labor for him, he participates in the
system Baker identifies as a “middle-passage” between the plantation and
the prison—convict lease labor. As Baker argues, after the Civil War,
southern jails and prisons were strained to their limits. Black “convic-
tions” for such petty larceny as “theft” of a three-dollar suit could
bring fines and court costs ranging up to a hundred dollars. Sentences in such cases could run in excess of ten years. Convicted
blacks were seldom (if ever) equipped to pay exorbitant fines levied
against them. Hence, they were released into the custody of the
white person who covered their court costs and fines. Then the true
incarceration began.

Terms of “working off” the debt incurred to one’s white debtor
might include hard labor in mining, turpentine manufacturing, or
railroad-construction camps and, of course, on southern plantations. In the South, whole southern state systems of “criminal jus-
tice” became sinister arrangements for the white criminalization of
black bodies in order to supply labor demands of a New South. (91)
Thus, through Marcus's story, Gaines reveals paternalism as just another form of coercion used by whites in positions of power—even decidedly urban and unaristocratic figures such as a parking lot manager and a jailer—to exploit African Americans. By divorcing paternalism from the mystifying context of the mythologized plantation, Gaines lays bare the exploitative nature of this system that purports to bind white and black southerners together in a spirit of familial love.

Marcus's experiences prepare him to see Hebert's overtures as motivated by his own interests, not paternalistic goodwill, and, rather than accept Hebert's favors with the shame-faced humility expected of him, he behaves in a manner singularly inappropriate for plantation labor. He continues to wear his flashy dress clothes in the field, even though they offer him little protection from the blazing sun (31). Although crossing the threshold of the big house would suffice to get him killed on other plantations, Marcus goes even a step further: he decides that if he must do Hebert's bidding and kill Bonbon, then he will run away with Bonbon's wife, Louise. Indeed, his plan rests on the consistent and violent enforcement of southern racial rules. He intends to take Louise away and then kill Bonbon when he attempts to stop them. When Jim asks him why he can be so certain that Bonbon will follow, Marcus replies, “Because Bonbon own people’ll kill him if he don’t. Because this is the South, and the South ain’t go’n let no nigger run away with no white woman and let that white husband walk around here scot-free. Not the South” (224). Thus, if Bonbon is to retain his standing in the community, and, indeed, perhaps his life, he must protect the honor of southern womanhood, an obligation which Hebert, who belongs to the class so ostensibly devoted to that lofty ideal, ignores in order to rid himself of his insubordinate subordinate. As Marcus tells it, “He got to get rid of Bonbon, not me. I’m a nigger, me. I ain’t nothing but a nigger. Bonbon is the man” (224). Gaines indicates that the rhetoric of Southern Womanhood, like that of paternalism, is hollow. When either one stands in the way of economic advantage, it proves immediately dispensable.

Although the tacit validation of an interracial love affair by a wealthy planter potentially has subversive implications, Gaines does not hold up Marcus and Louise’s relationship as a positive model. Jim describes Louise as still a child, sexually stunted: “Louise was about twenty-five, but she
was the size of the average twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl. Most of the
time she wore the clothes of a thirteen-year-old girl—she wore skirts and
blouses instead of dresses” (119). Further, Marcus initially finds himself
attracted to her only as a way to inflict pain on Bonbon (117, 118). And
according to Jim, Louise actually wants Bonbon to kill Marcus so that
Hebert will send him away and she can be rid of her husband, whom
she does not love (165). Although the relationship between Marcus and
Louise does seem to grow beyond these initial selfish motives, Gaines
continues to characterize it as immature and unrealistic. Aunt Marga-
ret tells the young lovers, “Y’all act like two black children or two white
children playing in the yard. There ain’t nothing to stop y’all from go-
ing North ’cause North right around the house. Well, North ain’t right
around the house, and y’all ain’t no children. Y’all grown people, and y’all
white and y’all black. And there ain’t no North for y’all” (207). Of course,
Aunt Margaret, like Bishop, feels a powerful loyalty to the Hebert fam-
ily and their plantation, and this loyalty may bias her interpretation of
their relationship. Certainly, Marcus does demonstrate a degree of em-
pathy for Louise; he tells Jim, “She much slave here as I was” (261). But
he ultimately reveals himself as mainly concerned with his own welfare.
Gaines suggests the superficiality of Marcus and Louise’s love for each
other when Jim asks Marcus if he truly cares for her. Though Marcus
first responds “Yeah,” Jim notes, “He didn’t say it too strongly, though.”
After repeated entreaties, Marcus answers as though he is attempting to
convince himself as well: “Yeah, I think I do. Yeah, I do. Maybe I didn’t
till just now—till you asked me. Now, I know I love her. It wouldn’t be
the same thout her. Yeah, I love her—love that little woman. Ain’t claim-
ing she much to look at—nobody in his right mind can honestly say that;
but I love her anyhow” (260). Further, though Marcus does feel drawn
to her because of their shared status of captivity, he also reveals himself
as largely concerned with the way in which she strokes his ego and tends
to his needs. He tells Jim, “She said, ‘Marky-poo, ’thout you I’ll go crazy.’
That’s what she told me. ’Thout you I’ll go crazy, Marky-poo. I need your
arms round me. I need your arms round me all the time, Marky-poo”’
(261). He continues, “Pretty good arm, huh? . . . Say she like the color of
my arms,” all the while “twisting his arm one way, then the other way” to
admire his own perfection. This display prompts Jim to realize, “He was
the same Marcus” (261). Ultimately, Marcus’s vanity and superficiality undercut whatever revolutionary potential his individualism may possess.⁵

Although Marcus and Louise’s escape attempt comes to naught—Bonbon kills Marcus and leaves the plantation—Marcus’s repeated violations of the physical and metaphorical boundaries of his role on the plantation open up, if briefly, the possibility for social change and raise the question of what model of interracial and/or cross-class political action Gaines implicitly endorses. Gaines has noted of his rebellious young character, “You see, Marcus was pre-revolutionary, pre-Civil Rights. Marcus looked after Number One” (108). By examining the relationship between Jim Kelly and Sidney Bonbon, we can better understand the nature of the alliances that Gaines believes individuals must form in order to undermine the system of paternalism and rigid race/class divisions that characterize the plantation system.

Jim’s position outside of and above the other African American workers makes it possible for him to understand Bonbon’s similar plight. As overseer, Bonbon occupies a position of power that aligns him with Hebert and planter power: “The big house had given him a horse and a whip (he did have a whip at first) and they had told him to ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could” (67). Most of the farmhands respect his authority: they do his bidding and fawn over his prowess with a gun (40). As with Troy Flavin in Delta Wedding, though, Bonbon’s close relationship to African American labor complicates his racial identity and his relationship to the aristocratic planter, as does his Cajun background. Suggestions of racial otherness pervade Jim’s descriptions of Bonbon. Jim tells us, “His mustache was lighter than his tan face and much lighter than his red neck” (79); thus, his long labor in the sun darkens his skin and associates him with the other dark-skinned workers in the fields. Jim notes of Bonbon’s white-haired daughter Tite, “Her hair looked whiter still with his big red hands going through it” (167–68). Most notably, Jim observes, when they go to a bar in Baton Rouge congenial to mixed-race individuals, that Bonbon “was darker than many of them” (143–44). Bonbon’s racial and class otherness means that Hebert does not have to treat him as an equal; in fact, Bishop has standing orders that Bonbon should come no further than the kitchen of his home.
Bonbon finds himself, then, caught in an ambivalent position. His Cajun identity means that he is considered “white trash,” and this status complicates his difference from the African Americans whose work he supervises. As Constance Penley puts it, “If you are white trash, then you must engage in the never-ending labor of distinguishing yourself, of codifying your behavior so as to clearly signify a difference from blackness that will, in spite of everything, express some minuscule, if pathetic, measure of your culture’s superiority” (90). Jim often describes Bonbon as wearing a “white cowboy hat” (79); when Bonbon first appears in Jim’s narrative, Jim reports that he “still had on that sweat-stained white straw hat and he was still wearing the dirty, sweat-smelling khakis he had worn in the field that day” (4). On another occasion, Jim informs us that “his khaki shirt was wringing wet with sweat. His white straw hat was turned up at the sides like a cowboy hat; he even wore cowboy boots” (36). While the sweat serves as physical evidence of the labor he performs as Hebert’s subordinate, the white cowboy hat, I would suggest, serves to separate Bonbon from the laborers beneath him. Clearly, its color aligns him with Hebert rather than with Jim, Marcus, and the rest of the crew. Further, Gaines has commented in an interview that, during his childhood on the plantation in Point Coupee Parish, one of his few escapes from the plantation and one of the few contacts with broader American culture occurred when he “went to the big city of New Roads every so often on Friday night to see cowboy movies” (224–25). Thus, perhaps Bonbon’s hat and boots help him confirm his whiteness by associating him with an identity not implicated in plantation labor. Indeed, the late 1940s would have been an ideal time for Bonbon to attempt to reinvent himself through his clothes: according to Bernard, after World War II, “Cajuns cast aside the antimaterialism of their ancestors and embraced the age’s rampant consumerism” (25). By having Bonbon and Hebert locate their class and race identities in their clothing, Gaines highlights the mutable, performative nature of social identities supposed to be essential.

However, Bonbon finds this perpetual process of affirming his whiteness too much to maintain, largely because of his love for Pauline Guerin, Marshall Hebert’s African American cook. Their relationship causes him to violate the boundaries so crucial to life on the plantation. According to the plantation workers, no one was surprised when Bonbon began
making “her lay down and pull up her dress” in the fields. But they fall in love. According to Jim, “He couldn’t just take her like he was supposed to take her, like they had given him permission to take her—no, he had to fall in love” (67). Thus Bonbon simply cannot behave in a manner befitting a poor-white Cajun overseer, and his inability creates problems for those committed to maintaining rigid distinctions of race and class. Jim notes that sometimes he visits Pauline “at the big house while they made Bishop, Marshall Hebert’s butler, look out for Marshall. Bishop hated what he had to do—but what else could he do? If he had mentioned to Marshall that Bonbon had gone farther than that kitchen, Bonbon, or Marshall himself, probably would have killed him” (66).

Gaines further invests their relationship with disruptive potential in his descriptions of their children, the twins Willy and Billy, whom Gaines describes as chaotic figures who destroy any boundaries they encounter. Jim points out that Pauline’s neighbors, Aunt Ca’line and Pa Bully, “had this barb-wire fence that came up on the gallery all the way to the wall. The fence was brought up there, according to Aunt Ca’line, to keep Pauline and Bonbon’s two little mischievous mulattoes on their side. But putting the barb-wire fence up there was like putting nothing there. The two little boys had ridden the fence so much, a grown person could step over it without touching a strain of wire” (60). We quickly learn, however, that the fence Willy and Billy so tenaciously wear down has significance for other reasons: it symbolically contains the threat to the plantation order implicit in Pauline and Bonbon’s love. Jim notes that whenever Pa Bully “cut[s] his eyes toward the other side of that fence where they had no business going,” Aunt Ca’line warns him to avert his gaze, as she has done ever since Bonbon began his visits. Thus, by destroying the fence and calling attention to the physical and social boundaries that divide the plantation, the twins threaten to expose their parents’ relationship to the rest of the plantation, an exposure that would have deeply unsettling results.

Lest we too quickly assume that Gaines simply means to celebrate the disruptive power of the racial mixing embodied in the “two mischievous mulattoes” as containing the potential to break down the boundaries of plantation society, we should note that the twins’ chaotic presence often has negative effects on the poor working people of Hebert’s plantation. For example, when Bonbon gives them a BB gun for their fifth birthday,
“nobody and nothing was safe on the place. If they weren’t shooting at another child, they were shooting at a dog or a chicken. They put a hole in the back of Jobbo’s little girl’s neck, and Jobbo had to take the girl to the doctor and pay the doctor bill himself. They shot the mule that Charlie Jordan was riding and the mule threw Charlie in the ditch.” They even shoot Aunt C’a’line’s irreplaceable “number one rooster”—who could do the work of five—in the eyes (68). Thus the disregard for borders and boundaries suggested by the twins’ indiscriminate gunplay does not automatically carry positive connotations; their chaotic behavior sometimes further deprives the already downtrodden workers of the resources they need to survive. Gaines suggests, then, that simply disrupting the oppressive but stable plantation system is not enough; what is needed is a better, more equitable system to replace it.

Another instance in which Gaines resists imbuing racial ambiguity with implicitly positive connotations is in his description of Marcus and Louise’s relationship. When Marcus first appears, Jim notes, “It was too dark to tell if he was white or colored” (3). Elsewhere, Jim observes, “Marcus had a lot of Indian blood in him, and he probably had a lot of white blood in him, too” (57). Moreover, Marcus and Louise’s plan to escape involves exploiting the slippery nature of racial identity. Louise covers her face and her daughter’s with soot so that they can pass as black, and she so skillfully manages the difficult task that, according to Aunt Margaret, “Tite looked more like a little nigger than Jobbo’s little girl Edna ever did” (241). Moreover, “you couldn’t tell Louise wasn’t colored. She had blacked up her face just the right amount. She had put on a hat with a veil. You couldn’t see her yellow hair at all, and you had to raise the veil to see her eyes or her mouth” (243). However, Gaines suggests that this alteration is strictly superficial, without any corresponding shift of perspective for Louise. Aunt Margaret notes that, as Louise powders Tite’s face with soot, “Louise didn’t look like a woman, she looked like a child playing with a doll,” a description that suggests that the same immaturity that characterizes her relationship with Marcus is still at work in this attempt to escape. Most significantly, Louise does not develop any new attitudes about race. When Aunt Margaret attempts to dissuade her from going through with the plan, Louise flies into a rage and threatens to hit her (242). Gaines links this outburst, one which indicates that Louise
still sees Margaret as her inferior, to the inevitable failure of their attempt to escape by exploiting racial ambiguity: when Tite sees the violent confrontation between Louise and Margaret, “The water started running down Tite’s face, leaving a white trail from her eyes to her mouth” (242). Tite continues to cry and further expose her white skin as Margaret faces down her mother. Thus, Gaines suggests that performances of racial ambiguity do not inherently generate any kind of positive social change unless individuals are willing to accept the larger political implications of the slipperiness and instability of the color line.

If Louise utterly fails to realize this essential truth, other characters in Of Love and Dust come closer, at least, though they, too, may fail in the end. Gaines continues to explore the potential for resistance to the plantation order through violating racial boundaries when Bonbon and Pauline seek out a space where they can be together outside the strict segregation of the plantation. They find it, however briefly, when Jim drives them to Baton Rouge. Not incidentally, Bonbon uses Jim’s mechanical expertise as an excuse to have him along to pose as Pauline’s husband and allay suspicions: he tells Jim he wants him to help him “pick up a piece for that hay machine” (131). The errand is only a diversion. According to Jim, “We found a bar where a lot of mulattoes hung out” (143). Jim observes, “I suppose they took Bonbon for a mulatto, too. He was darker than many of them” (143–44). Significantly, Bonbon divests himself of the outward symbols of his whiteness in this mixed-race space: he takes off his white cowboy hat—though he leaves it on the table, a gesture that suggests he is incapable of fully relinquishing his whiteness (143). Here Pauline and Bonbon find momentary comfort. Alas, their bliss does not last long, because Bonbon proves incapable of extending the political implications of their relationship, their togetherness in this “mulatto bar,” into the larger social sphere. Bonbon relies on Jim in this situation; he needs Jim to ask the black proprietor of the establishment for a room for him and Pauline because he sees such an economic and social transaction with an African American as beneath him. According to Suzanne Jones, “Playing pimp for Bonbon forces Jim to take a long hard look at how he is implicated in maintaining the status quo for black people when he facilitates the southern racial customs that discriminate against them” (154). Further, it is interesting that as long as they are laboring together on the plantation, in
a setting where Bonbon is most clearly in a position of power (even if he has relinquished the whip), Bonbon treats Jim with respect, as almost an equal, someone in whom he can confide in matters personal and professional. But in a "mulatto bar," ostensibly a place of free and easy racial mixing, Bonbon is so uneasy that he pressures Jim to assume a labor role—a pimp—that is stereotypically associated with black men. Away from the plantation, where he wields definite if conditional power, Bonbon quickly begins erecting the sorts of racial and class barriers he transgresses so casually at home. Jim does not feel bound to respect those boundaries, however, to Bonbon's chagrin: "He didn't like it when I said I wasn't going to be his pimp... He was helpless in a case like this. He wanted to be with her...; but he had to go to a black man, in a respectful way, and ask that black man for a room. He didn't know how to do that. He didn't know how to talk to a black man unless he was giving orders" (145).

Bonbon does, finally, ask the bar owner for a room, a gesture that suggests he begins to see the necessity of transgressing the rules governing racial interaction if he and Pauline are ever to be together. Gaines qualifies Bonbon's progress, however, by pointing out that the overseer finds it impossible to give up all signs of his power. When they enter the bar, Jim notes that Bonbon has brought his gun in with him: "He needed it everywhere he went. He needed it around his own Cajuns, he needed it around the Negroes in the field, and even needed it around these mulattoes who didn't know him at all" (144). Upon Jim's return to the bar, when he finds that Pauline and Bonbon have in fact rented a room, the proprietor notes Bonbon's weapon as well: "I see he bring his gun... Bad, a man need a gun all the time—no?" (149). Bonbon's reluctance give up his weapon foreshadows the tragic consequences of his inability to imagine a new way of living in the segregated South. Here, Gaines suggests that those most insecure about their status in the traditional southern hierarchy of race and class may be the least willing to relinquish those signs by which they maintain their tenuous hold on that status, and that that reluctance threatens to doom any possibilities for meaningful community. If Bonbon is willing to open up to Jim or to others outside his own race and class only in a setting in which he knows he holds more power, then the possibilities for creating any sort of transgressive alliance are bleak indeed.

Although Bonbon fails to break away from the traditional codes gov-
erning race and class, he does learn to see his plight as connected to Jim’s, to see the oppression that he suffers as part of the larger oppression of all the laborers on the plantation. He tells Jim, “Me and you—what we is? We little people, Geam. They make us do what they want us to do, and they don’t tell us nothing. We don’t have nothing to say ’bout it, do we, Geam?” (258). Bonbon’s statement ties him and Jim together as “little people” who live under the control of the powerful planter and who, perhaps, therefore have common interests. Bonbon’s murder of Marcus initially keeps Jim from reciprocating the feeling of solidarity. He says, “I couldn’t feel any pity for him. Far as I was concerned, all the human understanding we had had between us was over with now. He saw this in my face and I could see how it hurt him” (277–78). However, as Jim’s anger fades, he begins to see Bonbon’s impossible position: “If he hadn’t killed Marcus, he would have been killed himself. The Cajuns on the river would have done that” (277). Most importantly, Jim’s growing comprehension of Bonbon’s difficult situation leads him finally to reject the paternalism that the other African American plantation workers cling to, for he ultimately understands how paternalism divides workers who, aside from their racial differences, have a great deal in common. Aunt Margaret and the other old folks on the plantation quickly return to the old ways, forgetting the recent conflict except to worry that “them Cajuns might start some mess” (280). Jim, however, realizes that the Cajuns are not the real enemy: “[Hebert] killed Marcus; Bonbon didn’t” (279). Jim’s realization motivates him to opt out of the oppressive system. When Hebert warns him to leave the plantation, he claims to be concerned about marauding poor whites attacking Jim in retaliation: “These Cajuns know you and that boy lived in the same house, and they might get it in their heads to do you something” (278). Jim, however, understands that his knowledge of the way in which Bonbon and Marcus disrupted the caste and class system—and of Hebert’s complicity in that disruption—has made Hebert uneasy. According to Jim, “He wanted me to leave because I knew the truth about what had happened” (278). In his most crucial act, Jim refuses Hebert’s paternalistic charity: Hebert offers him “a recommendation. . . . Telling people that you’re a good worker” (278). However, Jim declines the recommendation, prompting Hebert to a red-faced rage, and he leaves the plantation behind.
Of Love and Dust exposes racial paternalism not as the evidence of selfless goodwill but as a tool whereby powerful whites maintain the loyalty of their African American workers and keep them from perceiving their common interests with poor white workers. Gaines challenges the rigid distinctions between race and class that make that separation possible by examining the disruptive potential of those individuals who cross race and class lines and the ramifications for traditional social customs if people truly understand the slipperiness and mutability of the color line. Moreover, in the figure of Jim Kelly, Gaines offers hope that individuals who can perceive the truth about paternalism and can understand the ways in which workers of all races are oppressed by the plantation system may begin to forge alliances—even if complicated, tenuous, and transient at first—across lines of race and class.

And yet—Jim walks away alone. His solitude stands in sharp contrast to the vision of joyous interracial working-class community in Reverend Goodyhay’s congregation in The Mansion, and it certainly complicates a reading of the novel that focuses on the importance of forming interracial and cross-class coalitions. Gaines continues to probe this dilemma in “Bloodline,” the long story from which his 1968 collection of short fiction takes its name. Though three of the stories collected in Bloodline—“Just Like a Tree,” “A Long Day in November,” and anthology staple “The Sky Is Gray”—had been completed and published before Of Love and Dust appeared, “Bloodline” marks Gaines’s return to the issues of race, community, and paternalism with the tale of Christian “Copper” Laurent, the illegitimate, mixed-race nephew of a dying planter, who has returned to the plantation to claim his birthright.

Like Marcus, Copper defies the rigid stratification of race on the plantation as embodied by thresholds and doorways. When Copper’s uncle, plantation patriarch Frank Laurent, insists that he enter the big house through the back door, he refuses. Frank’s insistence on this piece of traditional racial protocol serves as an attempt to erase Copper’s difference, an attempt to see him as essentially the same as any other African American in his employ: “That nigger is on my place. . . . Any nigger on my place comes to my house when I say come” (175). Significantly, Frank feels himself to be as much a prisoner of racial codes as Sidney Bonbon does. He tells Felix, an elderly worker on the plantation and the story’s narrator, “I
didn’t write the rules. . . . And I won’t try to change them. He must come through that back door” (187). And like Bonbon, Frank must fear the wrath of the Cajuns, who have no respect for him and who depend just as strongly on a clearly demarcated color line. He asks Felix, “How long do you think they’ll let him live if I let him force his way through that front door?” (199). Clearly, then, Frank’s power is a sham; he teeters precariously atop a volatile social structure, and any false move might send him tumbling; his position of power is also a prison.

When Copper handily bests even the strongest men that his uncle siccs on him, Frank finally submits to a meeting—but in the quarters, not in the big house. Copper lays out his plan: he intends to claim the plantation, lead his armies to revolt, restore the land to the full potential it has been denied by generations of oppression, and share its bounty with others like him. Copper feels that the land has not been allowed to thrive in the way that it could because of the cruel system of labor used to farm it: “The land has been wasted and is still being wasted, but it’s not beyond saving. . . . As for the houses, they’ll have to be torn down and built from the ground up” (210–11). Significantly, he argues that Frank has not truly understood the suffering that motivates his desire to revolt because his paternalism has kept him from really paying attention to any of his subordinates. Copper tells him, “You’ve always been in a position to give them a dime. Dimes clear all conscience” (214). Most interestingly, Copper imagines his army of the dispossessed as interracial; he intends to form a community of those who are oppressed for any reason, not just skin color. He tells Frank, “There’s millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me” (213). Thus, as opposed to Marcus, who was only concerned with his own salvation, Copper recognizes that his suffering unites him with others in similarly dire straits. Rather than simply burning down the plantation for the selfish joy of watching the flames, he has a plan, a model of affiliation and cooperation that builds upon the positive traditions of the past without repeating its injustices.

Of course, the implication that Copper may be delusional undercuts the hopefulness of his revolutionary vision. His sojourn in prison, where he was forced to clean the blood from cell floors and even from the electric chair, has inspired his new plan of action, but it may have also unbal-
anced him. He temporarily breaks down in front of Frank, revealing that he sees visions and hears the voices of those who have been destroyed by oppression, voices which may be guiding him: Felix often reports Copper touching his head and staring off into the distance, as if listening to barely audible whispers, before speaking. Although insanity would obviously undercut Copper’s credibility, the particular nature of his alleged dementia is intriguing: unlike Marcus, the epitome of individualism, Copper is a kind of medium through whom the voices of the oppressed can speak. Still, as in the case of Willy and Billy Guerin, Copper’s revolutionary potential is ambiguous. At the end of “Bloodline,” Copper simply leaves, promising to return and “bathe this whole plantation in blood” if they continue to deny him his birthright, but deferring any actual struggle until some unnamed future date (217).

By overemphasizing Copper’s abrupt departure and the question of his sanity, we may miss Gaines’s more subtle treatment of the evolution of Felix’s character and beliefs. When we first meet him, Felix seems fairly complacent in his role on the plantation. Although hardly as cringing and deferential as Bishop, he has apparently made his peace with the plantation system. Felix occupies himself by continuing to perform the job that he had as a young man, a job that has become obsolete as the plantation has begun to decay. Says Felix, “Every time I found something kind of rusty and needed working over, I brought it to the shop and cleaned it up. Once, there, this was my special job. From Monday morning till Saturday night, my job was to keep everything in good shape to work in the field. Ah, but that was long, long ago. Now all the old ones are dying, and the young ones are leaving—and the Cajuns are taking over a little more every year. So I came up to the yard now just to keep the old hands busy. Because once the hands had stopped, the man wasn’t no more” (163). Felix makes clear that, at this point in the story, his work in the shop is purely a matter of habit. He has so long defined himself by his job that he must keep it up even when the plantation is crumbling around him; he believes that without his work, futile as it may be, he would cease to exist. He cannot conceive of himself as existing outside of the plantation system.

However, Felix’s attitude about his labor begins to shift subtly when he meets Copper. Gaines indicates a connection between the young would-be usurper and the elderly metalworker. Both times that Felix meets
Copper, he describes his shoes as polished and shining like “new tin” (167, 206)—a description that calls to mind, even as it contrasts with, the rusty, worn-out metal in Felix’s shop. Significantly, after he first encounters Copper, Felix has an exchange with Frank that indicates that he has begun to find new meaning in his work beyond simple self-preservation. Frank, in a fit of pique, tells Felix he can leave the house and go back to the shop, and wonders aloud why Felix spends so much time there. Felix replies,

“Maybe some day somebody’ll use it again . . .”
“And who may that somebody be?” he said. “Copper?”
“I don’t know, Mr. Frank,” I said. “Maybe it will be Copper.” (177)

Felix’s response here clearly runs counter to his earlier ruminations on finding meaning in his labor; whereas before he merely performed his old job as a way of maintaining his identity in a world where the structure that gave him that identity is crumbling, here he seems to hold out hope, however fragile, that his work will not be simply individual and futile, but that it may be part of a larger project of reclaiming and re-creating the plantation. The shining “new tin” of Copper’s shoes represents the beginning of a new age, one in which Felix’s work benefits a new coalition of the formerly outcast.

In addition to Copper’s shoes, Gaines draws another connection between Copper and Felix. When Frank sends a group of men to bring Copper to his home by force, Copper fends them off with nothing but a new scythe blade handle. As one of his vanquished foes reports, it was “a brand new one—like it hadn’t left the store, yet. Could still see the label” (196). Significantly, when Felix lists the farm implements he has been maintaining in his shop, a scythe blade figures prominently among them (162). Thus, he and Copper have two parts of the same tool—the new handle and the old but well cared-for blade, symbolizing the complicated mixture of the traditional and the revolutionary that characterizes Copper’s vision of a new plantation for the dispossessed. When joined together, they will create a scythe that symbolizes the final death of the old plantation system.

Ultimately, then, if “Bloodline” represents the next step in Gaines’s thinking after Of Love and Dust, we can see that Jim Kelly’s biggest mis-
take was leaving on his own, giving up on the older, more complacent African Americans on the plantation as beyond hope or help. In "Bloodline," Gaines argues that real change can come only through joining the old generation and the new, through combining the best of traditional ideals with an egalitarian, perhaps even revolutionary, political ideology. But, he argues, in order to make that combination possible, a leader like Copper must make those African Americans who have so long toiled on the plantation aware of the potential they have to change the system. As Jones, who also notes Copper's influence on the plantation's older workers, observes, Copper recalls the "figure of the mulatto as race leader, a man with more cosmopolitan experiences than most black people who chooses to identify with the black masses in order to lead them" (216). Gaines thus suggests that interracial and cross-class alliances must be grounded in the particular traditions and culture of the geographical area in which they take place if they are to succeed.