Bloodlines and Patriarchs:
Of Love and Dust and Its
Revisions of Faulkner

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In the climactic scene of the novel Of Love and Dust, the young black man Marcus fights with Sidney Bonbon, a Cajun plantation overseer, in Bonbon’s front yard. Bonbon has returned home just in time to catch Marcus attempting to elope with Mrs. Bonbon. Their battle ends quickly when Bonbon seizes a scythe blade and chops Marcus to death. This grim reaper tableau echoes one of William Faulkner’s most famous scenes. In Absalom, Absalom! Wash Jones, a poor white, avenges an insult to his granddaughter by killing the patriarch Thomas Sutpen with a scythe. These scenes are very similar yet very different. Wash Jones and Sidney Bonbon might be viewed as analogous figures, but Marcus and Sutpen are exact opposites. For Wash to kill the unrepentant child molester, whom he reveres, seems ironic yet just. For the adulterous overseer to kill the reckless but heroic Negro, whom he has tormented throughout the novel, seems all too inevitable and not at all just, even to the callous Bonbon. Gaines’s echo of Faulkner produces complex reverberations.

Gaines echoes Faulkner in various ways, yet he never seems merely to imitate Faulkner, because in every instance, his echoes are combined with deliberate, purposeful dissonances. In some cases Gaines models entire books upon works by Faulkner. For example, Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses is clearly the paradigm for Gaines’s collection of stories, Bloodline, and both collections take their titles from one of the included stories. Like Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, Gaines’s A Gathering
of Old Men comprises numerous short sections, each told from the perspective of a particular character. In other instances, Gaines uses symbols that Faulkner used, though not necessarily with the same meaning. Thus, wild horses appear in Faulkner’s “Spotted Ponies” as forces of uncontrollable but benign nature. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, wild horses are ominous harbingers of mortality. Joe Pittman gains status and fame as a horse breaker, but horses also cost him his life.

Thematic interests are what these writers most often have in common. Miss Jane Pittman, like Absalom, Absalom!, explores the construction of historical narrative as a communal activity. Gaines shares Faulkner’s interest in the complexity of relationships between black and white Southerners, especially where love and friendship clash with rigid social prescriptions of racial roles. Both examine interracial love affairs. The passionate sexual relationship of Marcus and Louise in Of Love and Dust resembles the stormy encounters of Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden in Faulkner’s Light in August. Finally, both authors are fascinated and troubled with the uneasy dialectic between social stability and historical change.¹

Faulkner is important to Gaines not just because he is the greatest writer of the South, but even more, because Faulkner addressed so trenchantly the issues of race, history, and community that so deeply preoccupy Gaines. Consequently, in order to be taken seriously, Gaines has been obligated to acknowledge the precedents established by Faulkner and to locate his own work relative to them. Michel Fabre identified this issue more than a decade ago: “Faulkner’s shadow, more than ever since his death, hovers over every American novelist who writes about the South. This is perhaps more true for the black novelist because Faulkner spoke of his people with so much depth at times and often with so much compassion that his racial myths are the most indestructible. . . . The excellence of the Faulknerian style makes anyone who takes up his challenge look like an imitator. . . . Of all the new black novelists, Ernest Gaines alone really takes up Faulkner’s challenge” (110). One may quibble with Fabre’s assessment of Faulkner’s black characters, but he accurately identifies the monumental status of Faulkner’s work and its challenge to subsequent writers. He is also quite right in identifying Gaines as the contemporary author whose work reflects the most explicit relationship to Faulkner. Gaines himself has often acknowledged this relationship. In a 1978 interview with Charles Rowell, for
instance, he remarked: “Faulkner has influenced me, as I think he has influenced most Southern writers. But I’d like to make this clear: Faulkner has influenced me in style only, not in philosophy” (“This Louisiana Thing” 43). This distinction between style and content, while neat, is somewhat disingenuous, since earlier in the same interview Gaines acknowledged his agreement with Faulkner that “the past ain’t dead; it ain’t even passed” (42). Nevertheless, the more salient point is that Gaines explicitly asserts the importance of his complex and critical engagement with Faulkner’s work. This essay examines certain aspects of that engagement. It focuses on Absalom, Absalom! and Of Love and Dust, considering first some specific revisions of Faulkner by Gaines and returning in the end to the larger implications of the philosophical differences between the two.

Despite their many similarities, Gaines and Faulkner differ fundamentally in their views of history. Faulkner’s view is perhaps best summarized in a familiar passage from Absalom, Absalom!: “Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, . . . that pebble’s watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm” (210). This vision of endless repetition stresses the inescapable power of the past. Gaines’s historical vision seems to me best represented not by any single passage but rather by a characteristic situation: an individual making a difficult personal choice that will have dramatic impact on the future of both the person and the community. Marcus decides to seduce Louise Bonbon. Miss Jane Pittman decides to join a demonstration. The father in “A Long Day in November” decides to save his marriage by burning his car. By contrast, Faulkner’s characters seem not so much to decide as to act by compulsion. They look constantly backward, overwhelmed by past events and trapped by their tragic inability to make meaningful change. Gaines’s characters are also deeply bound by the past, yet they recognize that change is possible if one is willing to pay the price. Gaines’s emphasis on personal choice seems to reflect the folk wisdom of an oppressed people still struggling with the heavy shadow of slavery, just as Faulkner’s tragic fatalism embodies the guilt of a slaveholding
class. This is the difference in philosophical perspective that Gaines’s revisions of Faulkner seek to highlight.

Let us return for a moment to the pair of scythe killings. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the killing of Thomas Sutpen by Wash Jones is apt for many reasons. Most obviously, Wash acts as the avenger of his wronged granddaughter. Upon noting that Milly’s newborn child is a girl and not the son he had hoped to father, Sutpen remarks, “Well, Milly, too bad you’re not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (151). As he strolls arrogantly out the front door, intending to leave his paternal responsibility forever behind him, Sutpen instead meets the outraged, scythe-wielding Jones in the yard. Jones’s skewering of Sutpen is in fact more than merely a grandfather’s vengeance. He has tolerated the grizzled Sutpen’s courtship and seduction of this fifteen-year-old in the misguided conviction that “whatever your hands tech, whether hit’s a regiment or men or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make it right” (228). For Wash, Sutpen is a superhuman figure: “If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that’s what He would aim to look like” (226). Thus, Sutpen’s cruel dismissal of Milly represents the betrayal of both Wash’s explicit consent and implicit faith. Sutpen stands exposed in his fatal, all-too-human hubris, and Wash’s scythe blade calls the false God to account.

At a deeper level, Wash symbolizes Sutpen’s original self: the poor white who was turned away from the patrician’s front door by a condescending black servant. That humiliating encounter provokes Sutpen’s lifelong quest for wealth and social status. This being the case, his forcing Wash into an analogously humiliating position is revealingly ironic. Wash represents the poor white trash origins that Sutpen flees but cannot escape. Herein resides his tragedy. His own repressed self rises up to destroy him. Such a death is perfectly in keeping with the tragic designs of the novel. The heroic figure struggles to transcend his own human limitations and inevitably fails. Wash Jones, in his final guise as grim reaper, imposes that ultimate justice of human mortality.

The killing of Sutpen by Wash Jones represents, then, both human justice and a literary fulfillment of the novel’s tragic designs. By contrast, the scythe-slaying of Marcus by the overseer Bonbon in Gaines’s *Of Love and Dust* sounds a profoundly troubling echo. The setting
and action are virtually identical, except for certain details that Gaines reverses for ironic effect. In Gaines's novel, Marcus, the underdog, is the attacker, and Bonbon, his tormentor, warns him to desist. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the enraged Wash Jones assaults Sutpen, his social superior. One effect of Gaines's reversal here is to provide Bonbon a legitimate claim of self-defense. The alleged criminal, Marcus, who is innocent of any real crime, is struck down, while the predatory Bonbon triumphs once again. Thus, injustice is compounded, not avenged.

Other factors intensify the reader's sense that injustice triumphs with the killing of Marcus. Sutpen clearly deserves no sympathy. He precipitates his own demise when he rejects and insults the girl who has just borne his child. By contrast, Marcus meets his death as he attempts to rescue Louise Bonbon from her life as a despised prisoner in Sidney Bonbon's house. While Marcus's attempted elopement is adulterous, it is also an act of devotion, the first unselfish act he has performed in the entire novel. When Marcus has the opportunity earlier in the day to leave the plantation freely, without placing himself at further risk, he opts instead to keep his promise to Louise. Where Sutpen's death results from his failure of compassion, Marcus dies in the name of love. Bonbon kills Marcus only to defend himself, not to protect his home or the wife whom he has long ceased to love. Indeed, this killing liberates Bonbon to devote his exclusive attention to his black mistress.

In both novels, the women who are the pretexts for these duels suffer devastating consequences. Wash Jones cuts the throats of Milly and her newborn daughter, while Louise goes mad upon seeing Marcus slain and ends up in an asylum. Milly's death seems inconsequential, because Faulkner has portrayed her only as an abstract object of attention, devoid of consciousness, who speaks only a few words before she perishes. Louise, on the other hand, is a major figure in Gaines's novel. She evolves from a pale, girl-like apparition behind her picket fence to a woman rejuvenated and emboldened by an overwhelming, improbable love. Gaines depicts her struggle to understand what is happening to her. Her confusion resonates in the poignantly naive and revealing question she asks her black maid: "Margaret, do you think a white girl could love a nigger? . . . I mean a nig-gro" (184). The pathos of this limited, semiarticulate young woman, awakened to a consciousness of human possibilities and dreams of freedom by her dangerous affair with a black man, makes her compelling.
At the end, Gaines’s narrator describes Louise’s encounter with the bloodied corpse of her lover in a spare, indirect manner that contrasts sharply with Faulkner’s grandiloquence. Indeed, while Faulkner’s narrative emphasizes the verbal representation of imagined scenes, Gaines offers a depiction that seems virtually a camera shot: “Louise’s right hand was up to her mouth—no, not the hand, the tip of her fingers. . . . She brought her right hand slowly from her mouth and touched his face. . . . ‘You hurt, Marky-poo?’ she said softly. ‘You hurt?’” (272). The absurdity of her blackface disguise, which she has put on in anticipation of their elopement, vanishes in the fragile incredulity of her gesture. A few pages later, the narrator, Jim, provides our last information regarding Louise: “The same night of the fight, some people had taken Louise to a hospital in New Orleans. Not long after that, they took her to Jackson—the insane asylum” (278). This laconic report is poignant because Gaines has brought his reader to understand both the fragility of this woman and the intensity of her love. Unlike Milly Jones, she has weight and particularity for the reader.

Milly is merely the last victim of Sutpen’s callousness, but Louise has a history, feelings, and aspirations. While Milly’s death is interesting only in relation to Sutpen’s tragic hubris, the destruction of Louise carries its own pathos. This contrast reflects Gaines’s conscious design and one of his fundamental differences from Faulkner. In Absalom, Absalom! Sutpen is the central obsession of all the major characters: his contemporaries are consumed with the hopeless desire to establish intimacy with him, and his posterity are equally driven by the compulsion to understand his acts and his legacy. Even the deeds of his descendants are explained as reactions to or manifestations of Sutpen’s deeds. Though the lives of characters in Of Love and Dust are closely interrelated, no one is merely a pawn.

This contrast represents a subtle but significant difference between Faulkner and Gaines. In Faulkner’s world, characters are trapped within a history that they cannot hope to change. They compulsively reiterate narratives of past events, but those narrative acts yield, at best, only entertainment or perhaps fatalistic understanding of their own places in an unalterable pattern of events. Gaines uses historical narrative as a vehicle for understanding the complex interplay between continuity and change, the maintenance of community and the destruction of community. For Gaines, the possibility of significant change provides the
grounds for hope, even as it simultaneously promises to undermine cherished comforts. This difference between Faulkner and Gaines is more than a disparity of emphasis. Gaines’s view makes possible an orientation toward the future, albeit a future fraught with uncertainty. For Faulkner, the future is at best a foregone conclusion. These contrasting implications are reflected in the conclusions of the two novels.

At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve articulates a nightmare of racial degradation: “I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time . . . But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?” (302–3). This flight of racist fantasy inflates the Sutpen family curse into a curse upon the entire white race, which Shreve predicts will devolve into negroid idiocy. Unable to dispute this prophecy that the future will merely echo the past, Quentin pathetically asserts, over and over, echoing himself: “I dont hate it. I dont! I dont hate it!” (303). Though his denials are abject, at least they intensify rhetorically, in contrast to the novel’s general vision of historical entropy. Regardless, inevitability trivializes hope.

*Of Love and Dust* has a very different conclusion, as the narrator, Jim, bids farewell to Aunt Margaret: “I picked up the suitcases and the handbag and walked away. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw her going back home” (281). This passage suggests a vision of history comprising both continuity and change. As the novel ends, these two characters consider possibilities, and each makes a choice. Margaret returns home to her organic community with all its familiar limitations and comforts, while Jim departs in the opposite direction toward an unknown future. No monolithic “fate” presides over this world. Consequently, multiple possibilities remain open, though freedom is sharply constrained by the high costs attached to certain choices. Marcus, for instance, has paid the dearest price.

The openings of the two novels offer even more dramatic contrasts regarding stasis and change. *Absalom, Absalom!* opens with the stupefying images of a “hot weary dead September afternoon” in “a dim hot airless room . . . with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them” (3). This
passage embodies stasis and introspection, a triumph of the sterile dust settling on the room. The only hints of vitality are the sound of Rosa Coldfield’s outraged voice and the suggestion that her voice may call forth ghosts “out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust” (4). This dust symbolizes Rosa’s obsession with long-dead things and the absence of movement or change. The stillness of this room is reiterated by the stillness of Quentin’s dormitory room in the closing pages, while the movement from hot Mississippi September to frigid Massachusetts winter represents an even greater slippage into morbidity.

*Of Love and Dust* opens with a very different image of dust: “From my gallery I could see that dust coming down the quarter, coming fast, and I thought to myself, ‘Who in the world would be driving like that?’ I got up to go inside until the dust had all settled” (3). In contrast to Faulkner’s use of dust to depict a static, involuted world, Gaines uses it to signal disruption, a portent of the impact Marcus will have on this ingrown plantation. *Absalom, Absalom!* begins indoors, emphasizing stillness, while *Of Love and Dust* begins outdoors. The passage quoted above bristles with motion. These explicit contrasts represent conscious choices by Gaines to challenge Faulkner’s representations. The echoes of Faulkner that resound throughout this novel are deceptive. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the past exerts a corrosive power over the present, and history plays itself out in deteriorating repetitions. Change, though painful and costly, slowly undermines the repressive status quo in *Of Love and Dust*, making possible new conceptions and forms of social relations.

We cannot read Gaines’s response to Faulkner as a simple displacement or parody or reversal. Instead, I would argue, Gaines uses these powerful echoes to indicate his simultaneous agreements and disagreements with Faulkner. Gaines accepts the importance of most of the issues posed by Faulkner’s texts, but he differs on fundamental points of interpretation. For example, making a young black man the tragic hero entails an implicit criticism of the South’s dominant order. In Faulkner’s world, even a powerful black man like Lucas McCaslin owes his strength to a white patriarch. Gaines disrupts such genealogies. More important, the death of Sutpen changes nothing. It simply underscores a pattern of repetition and failure: a view of history as the degenerative reiteration of an unchanging pattern over time. By contrast, the death of Marcus changes everything. It ruptures the community and disrupts social relations, sending some characters into exile and altering
everyone’s consciousness of social possibility. To understand the difference between these two historical visions, we must consider the fates of the two murderers. Wash Jones commits suicide; Sidney Bonbon leaves Louisiana—probably with his Negro mistress. Despite Gaines’s insistence on the terrible cost of social change, he shows that change does happen, and he presents the future, guardedly, as a realm of possibility.

Gaines responds much more simply and overtly to Faulkner in his story “Bloodline.” In it a young mulatto named Copper returns home to confront his white uncle and to reclaim his birthright. Like an updated Charles Bon, he demands acknowledgment. Like Rider from “Pantaloon in Black,” he exhibits superhuman physical prowess as he easily dispatches the men sent to capture him. Like Samuel Worsham Beaufchamp in “Go Down, Moses,” he has grown hard and cynical from his experiences in the world beyond the plantation. But unlike Faulkner’s defiant Negroes, who are all killed by white men, Copper proves unconquerable. He declares at the story’s end: “We’ll be back, Uncle. And I’ll take my share. . . . Your days are over, Uncle. . . . It’s my time now. And I won’t let a thing in the world get in my way” (Bloodline 217). Even the word “Uncle” becomes ironic, as the young Negro applies it to an older white man, neatly reversing the traditional condescending use of this term in the South.

Superficially, the conclusion of “Bloodline” is more satisfying than Faulkner’s tragic endings and the conclusion to Of Love and Dust, but it is also less persuasive. Clearly, Gaines intends “Bloodline” as a whimsical departure from the realism prevalent in the collection’s other stories, just as “Pantaloon in Black” contrasts the dominant style in Go Down, Moses. Furthermore, this defiant conclusion aptly reflects the increasingly militant spirit of civil rights activism, which was emergent as Gaines wrote this story. Nonetheless, the painful conclusion to Of Love and Dust seems more true to experience. Ironically, just as critics have argued that “Pantaloon in Black” weakens the structural integrity of Go Down, Moses, one might also say that the story “Bloodline,” with its painless comedy, compromises the book Bloodline.

At the beginning of his interview with Gaines, Charles Rowell asked him why he had not published any fiction set in California. Gaines made a surprising response: “I suppose I have written four or five novels about California, but they are not very good books. They have not been pub-
lished. They will not be published during my lifetime, if I have anything to do with it. Maybe sometime in the future I will write a good book . . . about California. But I doubt that I will be able to do it until I have gotten rid of this Louisiana thing that drives me, yet I hope I never will get rid of that Louisiana thing. I hope I'm able to write about Louisiana for the rest of my life” (“This Louisiana Thing” 40). This comment suggests the degree to which Gaines’s imagination is rooted in a particular landscape and sense of community: his own postage stamp of Earth. Such a comment might imply a writer with a nostalgic relationship to his subject matter; but in fact, Gaines’s work maintains a forward-looking spirit that deftly evades the regressions and naively restorationist impulses of nostalgia.

Miss Jane Pittman and A Gathering, which overtly embody this concern with traditional communities in transition, focus explicitly on historical experiences and dramatic events that change the nature of social relationships within communities. Of Love and Dust, however, provides the most subtle meditation on the dynamics of continuity and change. The profundity of this novel manifests itself in the painful conclusion and particularly in the troubling ironies of the scythe-killing of Marcus. This tragic conclusion undercuts any impulse toward nostalgia that might otherwise accrue to a narrative about rural life in the past. Unlike the death of Thomas Sutpen, which represents the just dispatch of a hero gone degenerate, the death of Marcus Payne thwarts the development of a selfish adolescent into heroic manhood. Thus Gaines forces us to confront the cruel injustice of the Southern status quo and invalidates any impulse we might have to romanticize it.

The ultimate challenge that Gaines poses to readers in his depiction of Marcus’s death is to understand the complex interplay of continuity and change. I have already noted that this scene represents simultaneously the triumph of the status quo in the sense that the overseer Sidney Bonbon kills the upstart Marcus, and the emergence of social change in the sense that Marcus’s sacrifice inspires Jim and requires both Bonbon and Jim to seek new lives. We need also to consider two related issues: why the black community itself is resistant to change and why the positive results of Marcus’s heroism can emerge only indirectly. To understand these points takes us to the heart of Gaines’s argument with Faulkner.

First, despite the subordinate positions of the black people on the Hebert plantation and the wrongs they continue to suffer, they have
deep investments in the status quo. In a fundamental sense, “status quo” is a cognate for “community,” as they know community. Specifically, it means membership in a social order that is so old, so in-grown, and so thoroughly routinized that it has come to seem natural, organic. In an organic community all of the social roles, institutions, and activities are fixed through long-standing tradition. Thus, organic community frees its members from troubling uncertainties and difficult choices. Everything is always already decided for them, and if they conform by behaving as expected, they are rewarded with all the comforts of fellowship. Furthermore, they can even enjoy a sense of absolute knowledge, within their context. The characters Ma and Pa Bully, for example, sit on their porch and immediately recognize individual voices in the choir of the nearby church. They even recognize Marcus as someone who will soon be dead. Margaret, too, sees the future. “Y’all ain’t going nowhere,” she tells Louise (239). Unfortunately, the future for Margaret is merely the unchanging logic of the world as she knows it. Her folk wisdom cannot conceive of change. The necessary cost of membership in organic community is that one must accept its liabilities as well as its benefits. The permanent acceptance of racial and class subordination, the sexual exploitation of women, economic impoverishment, and rigidly proscribed social options are among the entailments of this particular Southern organic community. Its comforts are purchased at a high price.

Gaines makes this point most directly with the traditional “house servant” figures of Bishop and Margaret. Bishop, the butler for Marshall Hebert, feels a debt to his ancestors to maintain the prevailing order, symbolized by the plantation’s big house, precisely as it has always been. Marcus bewilders and terrifies Bishop with his aggressive, insubordinate demands to enter through the front door of the plantation’s big house and to speak with Hebert, whom he refuses to address as “Mr.” Both gestures express his rebellion against the prescriptions of submissive Negro etiquette. As Bishop declares incredulously: “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 explains that “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). Bishop is so consumed with the duties he has inherited that he lacks any critical perspective regarding what he is actually defending. His failure to turn aside Marcus, the symbol of emergent social change,
devastates Bishop. Jim leaves us with a pathetic image of him, slumped on the floor and reduced to abject prayer: “He was asking the old people who had died to forgive him for letting them down” (237).

Similarly, Aunt Margaret despises Marcus and the challenge he poses to her orderly life as housekeeper and babysitter. Unlike Bishop, she feels contempt toward her white employers. Sidney and Louise Bonbon are just poor white trash to her. Her devotion is toward the child, Tite, whom she tends. Thus, she opposes the romance of Marcus and Louise partly because of the threat it poses to the welfare of the child. Margaret also has, however, a profoundly fatalistic attitude. When Louise naively asserts that she and Marcus just want to be happy, Margaret remarks: “Some people can’t be happy together, Miss Louise. . . . It’s not made for them to be happy” (243). This comment represents both the resignation and the wisdom of a person who understands how the system works. This wisdom, which facilitates survival, also perpetuates the status quo. Margaret’s satisfaction in and commitment to her role as guardian allow her to find contentment within the prescribed limits of her social role but also prevent her from conceiving or even approving any action that might change her role.

Gaines’s inclusion and serious portrayal of these characters is neither gratuitous nor disparaging. They both represent familiar and traditional values within the black community. Furthermore, Gaines recognizes that such conservative values are crucial in maintaining community, just as the selfishness and aggressiveness of Marcus threaten to destroy the community. This difficult paradox has not been sufficiently understood, especially by liberal and progressive thinkers. Change alters and may undermine community. People like Margaret are willing to live with familiar evils precisely because they understand that the worst and best aspects of their lives are all bound subtly together in the fabric of community. To cut one strand may result in unravelling the whole. The benefit of eliminating what they despise may not be worth the cost of losing what they cherish.

This consideration is especially relevant given the time of the book’s composition. Published in 1967 as the civil rights movement faded, to be superseded by the black power movement, this book looks back to the historical moment just before the civil rights movement began to thrust its foot inside the door of the house built by slavery. It reflects upon the difficulties implicit in efforts to precipitate change in rural South-
ern communities—the sort of communities in which voter registration drives operated in the early 1960s. We know as a matter of historical fact that civil rights activists met considerable resistance, for different reasons, from both white and black people. Aside from the obvious white racism and black fear, compelling reasons for resistance included the uncertain costs and equally uncertain benefits of social change.

We know from Gaines's subsequent work, such as Miss Jane Pittman and A Gathering, that he has taken an enduring interest in this conflict between traditional community and the struggle for progressive change. Unfortunately, too many critics have missed the larger social implications in Of Love and Dust. In any case, the echo of Faulkner in the scythe-killing of Marcus should be understood with these factors in mind. Marcus must die because his victory over Bonbon would imply a kind of effective black heroism that would not have been plausible in the Louisiana of 1947. For Marcus to triumph would conclude this narrative with a historical lie. Yet ironically, Marcus's sacrifice makes it possible and necessary for Sidney Bonbon to leave the South; and Jim and Margaret speculate that Bonbon has gone north with Pauline, the black woman he loves. This irony, that Marcus and Louise lose everything while Bonbon and Pauline are set free, is in keeping with the uncertain nature of social movements. Those who take the risks and make the sacrifices may not be the beneficiaries.

These ironic reversals in Gaines's appropriations of Faulkner's fiction reflect a subtle understanding of social processes. Similarly, the high cost in blood and broken lives for very uncertain future benefits reflects Gaines's honest acknowledgment, even before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., of a bitter lesson taught by the civil rights movement. Once again, however, the difference between the two authors is decisive. In Absalom, Absalom! the deaths have absolute finality, while in Of Love and Dust deaths lead to new possibilities for others. Though unsettling, Gaines's vision in this novel is more true than the glib optimism of "Bloodline." By turning Faulkner's images in contrary directions, Gaines demonstrates possibilities of historical understanding that Faulkner's ideological perspective precluded.

Still, one might argue that Gaines could have made these points without relying on Faulkner. One might regard Gaines's intensive use of Faulkner as an indication of Gaines's own inadequacy—the anxious, futile struggles of a literary son to escape the overwhelming influence of
his patriarch. This would make Gaines rather like one of Faulkner's own characters. One might also see him as engaged in parody, "signifyin(g)," or some other such attempt at one-upmanship. Both perspectives, however, would have the likely effect of perpetuating a hierarchical concept of discursive relations by granting a monumental status to the earlier text. Such a view would make Gaines not only temporally but logically and ontologically secondary to Faulkner. In general, the problem of how to address the work of writers who labor in the shadows of great artists without subordinating the former or disparaging the latter deserves broader attention by literary theorists. To achieve this end, we need an egalitarian hermeneutic, which would insist upon locating both authors as respondents to and participants in an on-going cultural discourse. This hermeneutic would allow for chronological ordering but would also facilitate an emphasis on the discursive engagement between texts. By focusing on the egalitarian criterion of cogency rather than the hierarchical notion of relative greatness, such an approach would constitute a hermeneutic without patriarchs.

To draw this inference is not to suggest that Gaines's work explicitly makes these or any claims about interpretive theory. Rather, the point is that his work reminds us of the deep interdependence of African Americans and European Americans, especially in the South. Obviously, there is no necessary correlation between social realities and forms of literary criticism. Still, insofar as Gaines's work provides an intellectual example, it seems to urge us to develop broadly inclusive forms of literary study, which will allow us to understand literary works not just as self-contained artifacts, but more important, as elements in an American cultural discourse. Gaines uses Faulkner just as Faulkner uses European mythology. He recognizes that Faulkner's sense of tragedy and fatality represents deep truths about Southern history, but he also recognizes that these are not the only truths. Gaines does not attempt to discredit or displace Faulkner's work nor to imitate or endorse it. Rather, he uses Faulkner as a point of reference in his own effort to understand the experience of Southern communities. Where they differ fundamentally, however, is in their philosophical perspective regarding social change.

This last point brings to mind one of Walter Benjamin's pithy statements about historical study in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to
a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency’ (259). In the first instance, the “state of emergency” refers to triumphant fascism; in the latter instance, it envisions a revolution that will overthrow fascism. Though Benjamin’s context is different, his point is relevant to our understanding of Gaines. In *Of Love and Dust* the plantation folk recognize the crisis precipitated by Marcus, but they fail to understand how it reflects and reveals the constraints in their accustomed way of life. In effect, their way of life is a perpetual “state of emergency.” Only Marcus has the daring to try to break free. Though his elopement fails, his attempt ruptures the system, leaving open a crack in the door through which others might escape. Gaines, the novelist-historian, offers this insight to his readers.

By insisting on the possibility of real change, Gaines voices the dream of black people for a better future; but by taking seriously the cynicism and tragic sense of Faulkner, he reminds us how painful and difficult all serious change must be. This struggle requires endurance, dignity, and toughness. Gaines captures this point in the conclusion to his story “The Sky Is Gray.” The narrator, a small boy, and his mother walk out into a storm. He observes: “The sleet’s coming down heavy, heavy now, and I turn up my coat collar to keep my neck warm. My mama tells me turn it right back down. ‘You not a bum,’ she says. ‘You a man’” (*Bloodline* 117). This storm symbolizes the suffering and hardship that characterize the boy’s life. His mother’s point is that dignity is more important than comfort. Without such a conviction, one is not likely ever to challenge a status quo that strips away manhood and womanhood as the price for admission to the comforts of community. Gaines calls our attention to the significance of such small gestures.

Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” offers another apt observation that extends the previous point:

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism, the past strives to
turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations. (256-57)

Though Gaines is not a Marxist, Benjamin’s comments are pertinent to his work because of Benjamin’s explicit concern with the perspective of an oppressed class. As a historian, Gaines is Benjaminian. He emphasizes the qualities of courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude as expressions of his characters’ unvanquished spirits. Faulkner praises the same qualities, but always in the context of enduring under tragic circumstances. Gaines, on the other hand, is more interested in those gestures that challenge the victories of the rulers. This is what makes Of Love and Dust so fascinating. Like Benjamin’s flower, it strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history.

**Notes**

1. My reading of Faulkner has been strongly influenced by King’s A Southern Renaissance. For the most detailed discussion of Gaines’s relationship to Faulkner see Fabre. Gaines himself comments frequently on Faulkner in Gaudet and Wooton.

2. Bryant notes that Gaines originally planned a different ending for this novel, allowing Marcus and Louise to escape (“Gaines” 855). It is difficult to imagine how Gaines could have erred so blatantly, since both the logic of this narrative and the Faulknerian precedents demand a tragic ending. Ironically, the death of Marcus makes hope for change meaningful, while the triumph of Marcus would have been so anomalous that no social generalization could have been drawn from it.

3. Of the various articles addressing the politics of these two novels, none has been more discerning about the complex interplay of cultural and political values than Callahan, “Image-Making.”

4. I have in mind, first, the literary theories derived from Freudian psychoanalysis, elaborated in works such as Harold Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence; and second, the theory of African-American literature developed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in The Signifying Monkey. Neither critic has addressed these specific texts. I am suggesting, however, that their theoretical approaches would not be conducive to the broadly contextual reading of Gaines that I advocate.