TO MAKE THESE BONES LIVE: HISTORY AND COMMUNITY IN ERNEST GAINES’S FICTION

With The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), Ernest Gaines has become one of our most highly regarded Afro-American writers. While Miss Jane Pittman is his signal achievement, the world of the novel is identical to that of his three earlier books—Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), and Bloodline (1969). All of Gaines’s work is seeded in a basic land derived from his native Pointe Coupee Parish in Louisiana: extending chronologically from 1865 to the mid-1950s; geographically, from the winding bayous and tabeulands to the decaying plantations and slave quarters northwest of Baton Rouge, along his fictive St. Charles River. Upriver, beyond the corn and cotton and cane fields, lies the small town he calls Rayonne. His characters are ordinary people, black, white, and “in-between.” This last group of mixed bloods and cultures is important, for Ernest Gaines’s special interest is indeed in those who are “in-between”: races or ethnic groups (poor Blacks, Cajuns, Creoles, “Melicans”); traditions and institutions (slavery, religion, share-cropping, the great web of folkways and unwritten laws that bind and separate all Southerners).

While his lands and subjects are consistent, there is an evolution of Ernest Gaines’s vision through his four works, as he becomes increasingly concerned with black history and black community. The movement from Catherine Carmier to Miss Jane Pittman is from personal and racial history rendered as a kind of bondage, a solitary existential nightmare of dead ends and blasted families, toward history sensed as a natural cycle, wheeling slowly through the rebirth of a people, toward their inevitable collective liberation. As his vision matures, there is an accompanying shift in Gaines’s use of materials and fictional techniques. He moves away from a personal version of the white “existential” novel, later assimilating and adapting folk forms—popular sermons, slave narratives, folk tales, oral histories—re-making the long fictional forms to his own unique ends.

A. History Is A Wall: Catherine Carmier

So the struggle went on. The little incidents, the little indirect incidents, like slivers from a stick. But they continued to mount until they had formed a wall. Not a wall of slivers that could be blown down with the least wind. But a wall of bricks, of stones. A wall that had gotten so high by now that he had to stand on tiptoe to look over it. (CC, p. 94)

Jackson Bradley’s plight in Catherine Carmier is familiar to readers of Afro-American fiction, reminiscent of that of John in W. E. B. DuBois’s story, “The Coming of John” in The Souls of Black Folk. At age twenty-two, gone ten years and having recently finished college in San Francisco, Jackson returns to the Grover plantation and his Aunt Charlotte. Rootless and disillusioned, he finds no place in this old world, and returns to make final goodbyes. For his Aunt Charlotte and the few remaining Blacks, he is a last hope, a way of reviving the dead era they sense being played out in themselves. They are mostly old people. “enduring” like Faulkner’s Dilsey, and while they sense their own communal demise, they resist it stubbornly, existing “like trees, like rocks, like the ocean” (p. 171). Aunt Charlotte, the first of a gallery of old “aunts” peopling Gaines’s fictions, implores Jackson to stay on: “You all us can count on. If you fail, that’s all for us” (p. 98).

The world of Grover is a Southern wasteland: the plantation lacks even the full status of sharecropped land, as many of the remaining older Blacks live in the “quarters”, paying a token rental. The bulk of the land has fallen from white to black to Cajun hands, and this latter group swarms in the novel like locusts, preying on the land, farming it mechanically and voraciously. Man lives in no organic relationship to his soil in Catherine Carmier, and this only makes all the moreRaoul Carmier, is an unhealthy influence, an anachronism. A light-skinned mulatto, Raoul is unable to work with Whites and unwilling to live in a black world. He is bloodlocked, a blind end, and the backlands and bottoms to which he returns are more a tomb than womb for him, a source to which he cannot return. While Jackson Bradley is unable to enter any future, Raoul cannot escape the past. There is no harmony and no order in his world, and the past is a recurring evil dream, from which there is no awakening. This can be seen in his family; his wife Della is also a mulatto, taken as an early convenience and now scorned. She is less able to shut the world out, and bears an illegitimate son by a black lover. Carmier fathers two daughters, Catherine and Lillian, the youngest taken away early to be raised by his relatives in New Orleans. Lillian and Jackson arrive separately on the same bus at the novel’s opening, each returning to a ruined land. But it is her older sister, Catherine, jealously protected by Raoul, whom Jackson seeks.

Like many young Southern Blacks in the 1930s and 1940s, Jackson Bradley goes north for a better life. He finds no home there, and manages only to kill off any viable past for himself: “. . . the faults there did not strike you as directly and as quickly, so by the time you discovered them, you were so much against the other place that it was impossible ever to return to it” (p. 91). He does return to Grover, but only to make a
clean break of it. His rejection is protracted, complicated by his love for Aunt Charlotte, for whom he remains a twelve-year-old black boy. Severing his past has serious human consequences, but only in a series of conversations with his former teacher Madame Bayonne does he realize that there is no easy way out. Madame Bayonne is one of Gaines's "wise aunts": she "knows people," and while rumored to be a witch, she is simply, profoundly, wise. Aware of Jackson's need to leave this past, she advises him of the human consequences, of the effect on his aunt: "...it will be the worst moment of her life." (p. 71).

Liberation, then, is to cast this past aside, to be freed of the world laid out for him by his many "aunts" and "uncles." The prime difficulty for Jackson is that it is already dead for him, sterile. His being is projected in the landscape. Like the soil that drifts across his sight, he is dust, desiccated. He sees himself in images of organic sterility, confessing to Madame Bayonne, "I'm like a leaf...that's broken away from the tree. Drifting." (p. 79). Unable to join his aunt in the prayer she pleads for, unable to locate emotions to which he can respond, he is like her garden, "half-green, half-yellow...dry, dead." (p. 102). Even his childhood memories, idyllic and romanticized distortions of the past, hold little power for him.

After he systematically cuts old roots—family obligations, community ties, religion, past friendships—Bradley finds himself alone, purely alone, and it remains for him to find some means of existence, some way of breathing life back into himself. His desired movement is from sterility toward life, from the dying remnants of a community shaped by slavery toward a freer, more solitary, more existential present. Jackson's relationship with Catherine Carmier is the apparent means of achieving this ideal.

Catherine Carmier has been watched over by Raoul just as Jackson has been watched over by Charlotte. She is the sole creature for whom Raoul shows love, serving as an emotional mother-wife to him, and he shelters her jealously. Dark-skinned, Jackson has been taught by all to stay away from the Carmier house, but he courts her. In their loving, he is again forced to face his past, to respond to it emotionally. While he fears being "walled-in by fate," Catherine feels herself obligated first to Raoul, who has nothing else. As Jackson tells her, "You're light. You're life." (p. 149), but a relationship with her does not guarantee a free and meaningful life. Through her, he hopes to rescue them both from their pasts and make for them a liveable present.

Jackson's struggle to achieve this is most apparent in structural terms, in recurrent scenes near the end of each of the novel's three parts. Each part closes on an image of Jackson in some relation to the Church. At the close of Chapter 22, for example, he rejects his aunt's Christianity as a "bourgeois farce." (p. 100), refusing prayer, sensing in the dried-up world outside the window a projection of his own spiritual deadness. At the end of Part Two he returns to his childhood church-school building, rummaging memory for some living presence. He is momentarily poised between two modes of being, fruitful past and barren present: "How small was the yard...What had happened? Had he grown so big or had the place actually shrunken in these ten years?" (p. 192). But this scene also dies, surrenders its life, as he dwells on the barrenness of the old elms and pecans surrounding the yard. Near the end of Catherine Carmier, Jackson and Catherine go to a dance in a church. They make love in the churchyard, briefly reviving the institution in a more personal, secular form. But the cycles of their experience are dominated by her sense of obligation to Raoul. Even after Jackson and Raoul fight, in a ritual scene of blood-letting, their relationship is ambiguous. Della Carmier urges that Raoul's beating will free them all, but the novel closes cryptically, on an image of Jackson alone, behind more walls, as Catherine takes her father inside. "He watched her go into the house. He stood there, hoping that Catherine would come back outside. But she never did." (p. 248).

Catherine Carmier is informed by a view of personal and racial history as a prison, a tomb, from which Jackson Bradley can never quite escape. There is little possibility anywhere in his world: South and North are equally unacceptable, and he is thrown back on his own scant internal devices, faced with the need to make of his isolation a liveable existential present. But the single factor making this possible—at least for Jackson Bradley—is a bloodline, some possibility of human love, or even contact, and this is at best elusive. His inability to connect is partly a function of his own historical myopia. For him the past is ossified, to be escaped, but the sort of existential freedom he seeks can come only in making psychic peace with his own racial, historical past. Bradley would be free but...
finds himself a "freedman," a term born idealistically in early Reconstruction, quickly galled with a bitter, ironic overtones.

The once-nourishing confines of the houses of Carmier and Bradley, Gaines suggests, are reduced to rubble, walls of slivers that entrap no less than brick or stone. And if racial and personal history are prisons, any hope of community is also dead. Indeed, the whole of Grover is, like the "whole house of Israel" in Ezekiel. Their bones are dried up, their hope is lost, they are "clean cut off."

B. History Is My Face: Of Love and Dust

No, it wasn't The Old Man. I had put my own self in this predicament. I had come to this plantation myself, when my woman left me for another man in New Orleans and when I was too shame-face to go back home. I had heard that Hebert needed a man who could handle tractors and I had come here for the job. . . . No, it wasn't The Old Man. The Old Man didn't have a thing in the world to do with it. It was me—it was my face. (OLD, pp. 147-48)

While most of Jackson Bradley's trials in Catherine Carmier are conducted off-stage, the social disintegrations one can read in his state are far too dim and summery to fully engage us. Gaines's second novel, Of Love and Dust, shares the same time and locale, but the conflicts and divisions are concretely dramatized for us, rendered as functions of the lives of fully developed characters. The world of Hebert Plantation bears an air of active spirits here, slowly being eaten up by sharecropping Cajuns, with an "old side" worked by Blacks and overseen by Cajun Sidney Bonbon, the entirety owned by a Creole, Marshall Hebert. The ways of a black past are also more densely realized, in the individual lives of poor Blacks living there. Gaines's interest in humans is more properly placed in Of Love and Dust, for in the natural play between his characters—their races, eras, generations, values—the personal and historical dimensions vify each other. Filtered through narrator Jim Kelly's mind and colored by his need for his people and their diversity, the world of Hebert is less skeletal, much more compelling than Grover.

The historical vision underlying this second novel is also more developed. Of Love and Dust grants that the historical legacy of racism, or fate, or a kind of social inertia may well dominate, but it offers a partial reconciliation between a black man and his historical past (so binding in Catherine Carmier), and his psychic need for dignity and greater freedom. Jim Kelly is trusted by Black and White alike, but reads in 'crazy nigger' Marcus's carryings-on as a refusal to yield however great the price. He comes to believe that he can act individually on principles, with dignity, without rejecting his entire racial history.

Hebert Plantation before Marcus is a cosmos in the minds of those living there, a little world propelled and ordered by its own gravities, inertias, regressions. The rich front lands have fallen to Cajun sharecroppers. Hated by Black and White, they have only recently worked up to the land from the bayous, and they hold on tenaciously. In the minds of landholding Whites, Cajuns are racially inferior, though of greater status than Blacks. Here, as in Bloodline, in the figures of men like Sidney Bonbon, they have a vested psychic and financial interest in white supremacy. The "old ways" becomes doubly important in their eyes, and every time a Black enters the formerly "unsoiled" Hebert family library, or goes in the wrong door, he threatens an entire world, an existence, and must be dealt with quickly.

The world of the Blacks living at Hebert is at once utterly defined and precarious. "The Old Man," "The Master," we are told repeatedly, watches from his heavens, indifferent or exhausted. Marcus's stubborn violations are threatening, cosmically unnatural to Aunt Margaret and C'line Bishop, as if God (Himself) is powerless, asleep or unconcerned. Gaines's old people are more numerous here, and while they do indeed live and think in "old ways," they are treated sympathetically in Jim Kelly's account. They have learned a simple lesson from the past—that all are punished for the transgressions of a few, and that submission is necessary for basic survival.

Bonded out of jail by Marshall Hebert, Marcus can accept few of the laws governing the plantation. An unwilling killer, he is expected to work for five years in a sort of indentured servitude. Beyond forced labor, his "breaking" by Bonbon and Hebert will signal a warning to Blacks, and representing as he does an urban, more contemporary existence, his submission will be a sign that the past of white supremacy is alive, dominant. Marcus is unaware of his own significance, but his first experiences bring the message home. Jim recalls Marcus's arrival:

He got in the middle and I got in beside him. It was blazing hot there with all three of us crammed together. Bonbon went down the quarter to turn around at the railroad tracks, then he shot back up the quarter just as fast as he had come down there. I knew what to expect when he came up to his house, so I braced myself. The boy didn't know what was coming, and when Bonbon slammed on the brakes, the boy struck his forehead against the dashboard.

"Goddamn," he said.

"All right, Geam," Bonbon said to me. He acted like he hadn't even heard the curse words. (Pp. 4-5)

But Marcus does not break. He is tried by machines in the corn field, his fellow Blacks—most of whom pray for his failure—in the fields, 'house fairs,' and stores of the plantation. Undaunted, he is the first of Gaines's rebellious black characters to resist the past, assert his will. He is not romanticized, and his stubborn refusal to yield is not a function of any pattern of social or political considerations. Vain and foolish, he runs on earthly appetities and intuitions,
Pauline rejects Marcus, and only then does he turn to Louise Bonbon, Sidney Bonbon’s black mistress.

Pauline’s rejection of Marcus, and the resulting turn to Louise Bonbon, is a pivotal moment in the novel. By turning to Louise, Marcus is forced to confront the limitations of his own racial and social position. This decision is not only a reflection of his own desires but also a manifestation of the broader social dynamics of the time. The rejection by Pauline, who is a symbol of both love and ambition, underscores the precariousness of Marcus’s position and the constraints that defined his life. This moment highlights the complex interplay of love, ambition, and social hierarchy in Faulkner’s work, emphasizing the ways in which individuals navigate the constraints of race and class.

The scene described above is a classic example of the way Faulkner uses the relationship between Marcus and Louise to explore themes of desire, ambition, and the constraints of race. The rejection by Pauline, and the subsequent turn to Louise, serves as a turning point in Marcus’s development, leading him to confront his own desires and limitations in ways that are both personal and societal.
who accept and submit, mark their fates off as determined by the will of "The Old Man." But gradually, Marcus's actions stir him up, force him back on himself, and he re-discovers in his sentimentalized past a basic truth, that "... man has to do it for himself now. No, he's not going to win, he can't ever win; but if he struggle hard and long enough he can ease his pains a little" (p. 52). In response to Marcus's stubborn refusal to give in, Jim grows more self-reliant, realizing finally—as the headline quotation expands—that "... it wasn't The Old Man. ... It was me—it was my face" (p. 148). And while he cannot absolve Marcus of the killing that brought him to Hebert, he grows to respect him, to see in his seemingly futile affair with Louise the roots of human liberation. Shortly before Marcus's death, he admits:

"I admired Marcus. I admired his great courage. And that's why I wanted to hurry up and get to the front. That's why my heart had jumped 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. I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. ... I wanted to tell them that they were starting something—yes, that's what I would tell them; they were starting something that others would hear about, and understand, and would follow."

"(P. 270)"

Jim's movement toward an awareness of the need for a black man to chart his own way is not purely existential, individual. He does grow to recognize social realities in large terms—for instance, that "they" manipulate "the little people," and he agrees with Bonbon that "... We is nothing but little people," adding that "Marcus was just the tool. Like Hotwater was the tool—put there for Marcus to kill. Like Bonbon was the tool—put there to work Marcus. Like Pauline was a tool, like Louise was a tool...." (pp. 269, 270). But in Marcus, Jim Kelly sees a willingness to walk out of the furrows, glimpses a black past and the basis for a black future. Marcus was a solitary bloodline, one who sensed in every breath the course demanded by his own eulogy: "'Man is here for a little while, then gone.'"

Marcus's recent history revives Jim's own more distant past, and the past comes to show the possibility of individual existential choice and action. Cycles and ritual patterns are again significant in this second novel. There is a three-part structure again, and while there is a carefully constructed repetition of key scenes (Jim talks with his "aunts" near the opening of each part), the emphasis is on character evolution. The opening scenes of Parts I, II and III depict Marcus's growing freedom (I: Marcus riding in Bonbon's car; II: Marcus riding with Jim on Red Hannah; III: Marcus walking willingly into the Bonbon and Hebert houses). And each part closes on Marcus involved in a fight or struggle. As Part I closes, he is lying down unconscious, defeated in a fight, and in III, he is lying down, dead, seemingly as near victory as a black man can be in the world of Hebert. The tale runs full cycle, opening on Marcus's bonding-out for murder, closing on his own liberation in death. But the emphasis is on the effect of all this on Kelly. Through Marcus, Kelly can see his own face more clearly, that of a black individual whose features have been forgotten for a time, but can be re-imagined in shaping a life with human dignity.

And in Marcus's actions, and in his own, lie the inchoate beginnings of a true black community. They are "... starting something that others would hear about, and understand, and would follow."

C. History Is The Wind On The Water: Bloodline

"She's not the only one that's go'n die from this boy's work. Many mo' of 'em go'n die 'fore it's over with. The whole place—everything. A big wind is rising, and when a big wind rise, the sea stirs, and the drop o' water you see laying on top the sea this day won't be there tomorrow. 'Cause that's what the wind do, and that's what life is. She ain't nothing but one little drop o' water laying on top the sea, and what this boy's doing is called the wind .... Go out and blame the wind. No, don't blame him, 'cause tomorrow, what he's doing today, somebody go'n say he ain't done a thing. 'Cause tomorrow will be his time to be turned over just like it's hers today. And after that, be somebody else time to turn over. And it keep going like that till it ain't nothing left to turn—and nobody left to turn it."

("Just Like a Tree." I, p. 245)"

With Bloodline, Ernest Gaines sounds a very different emphasis on black history and community. The vision of history as fate, as a cycle from which one cannot escape, is expanded. As the title Bloodline suggests, the book is concerned with the living, the organic, and Gaines is writing with a vision of the natural history of a people. The dominant concern through these five stories is with natural patterns of growth and decay, the evolution from childhood to maturity to old age as seen in the lives of people, races, generations, eras. In the shapes of these stories, and in the recurrent images and metaphors, the past, present and future are all of a piece; history is part of a natural process, and humans who live within it find their lives infused with significance.

The focus in these stories is on individual growth, and only rarely do we encounter intruders like Jackson Bradley and Marcus, men who can never really "fit" in Gaines's worlds. Rather, as suggested in the organic metaphors, the characters are alive, seem to evolve naturally, go through cycles and evolve almost unconsciously, like Aunt Fe's beloved giant oaks in "Just Like a Tree." The five stories are ordered from childhood experiences to those of old age. The first two, "The Sky Is Gray" and "A Long Day In November," are filtered through the consciousness of young black children. The fourth and title story, "Bloodline," is the weakest in the collection; thus I consider two very different stories here, "Three Men" and "Just Like a Tree."
Of Gaines's four books, *Bloodline* is the most persistent in examining the obligations of black manhood, particularly as it is thwarted and destroyed in the South. This is a universal torture, though, reserved by all oppressors for the oppressed, not limited to these people, this time, that place. "Three Men" is an examination of the growth of a black bloodline, an imagined instance of development from personal self-esteem toward more public, more political forms of resistance to oppression. Gaines uses the same premise here as in *Of Love and Dust*, that the bonding-out of an arrested Black is a means of personal self-esteem toward more public, more bloodline breaking the same premise on a morals charge. ("'Caught him playing with this nightclub fight over a woman. He is led through a kind

Lewis gives himself up after killing another Black in a scene in which the tissue of black and white ties-s-a scene in which the black and white races are the oppressors for the oppressed, not for all his posturings and excesses, he conveys a sense of dignity and responsibility for his crimes. And then, puzzled, as Lewis orders him to pray: "'I don't believe in God . . . But I want you to believe. I want you to believe He can hear you. That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings—with you praying' " (p. 158). Like Bazille, he is a bloodline, a living graph of past and future, and his disgust gives way to affection, dramatized in the small, intimate ritual ceremony of tending the boy's wounds: "'I wet my handkerchief and dabbed at his wounds: "I wet my handkerchief and dabbed at

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Gaines depicts the third man, Munford Bazille, with a distanced irony reserved for his black rebels. Like Marcus, and like Copper in "Bloodline," Bazille is in no way romanticized. He is more than a little crazy, but for all his posturings and excesses, he conveys a truth. Bazille is a habitual offender, bonded out repeatedly by plantation owner Roger Medlow. In the nineteen-year-old Lewis, he sees himself some years earlier, and shows a peculiar blend of disgust and affection, urging him to refuse bond for prison. "'He felt sorry for me," Lewis observes, "and at the same time he wanted to hit me with his fist'" (p. 141). A local phenomenom, Munford Bazille is, like Hattie, still another misshapen version of black manhood encouraged by whites. But while he has little control over his will to violence against other Blacks, he is aware of what he is doing, and why it is encouraged. In one of his lucid moments, he speaks thoughts very much like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*:

"'Been going in and out of these jails here, I don't know how long . . . forty, fifty years. Started out just like you—kilt a boy just like you did last night. Kilt him and got off—got off scot-free. My pappy worked for a white man who got me off. At first I didn't know why he had done it—I didn't think; all I knew was I was free, and free is how I wanted to be. Then I got in trouble again, and again they got me off. . . . Didn't wake up till I got to be nearly as old as I'm is now. Then I realized they kept getting me off because they needed a Munford Bazille. They need me to prove they human—just like they need that thing over there. They need us. Because without us, they don't know what they is. With us around, they can see us and they know what they ain't..." But I got news for them—cut them open; go 'head and cut one open—you see if you don't find Munford Bazille or Hattie Brown. Not a man one of them. 'Cause face don't make a man—black or white. Face don't make him and fucking don't make him and fighting don't make him—neither killing. None of this prove you a man. Cause animals can fuck, can kill, can fight—you know that?'" (Pp. 137-38)

Munford is bonded out again, but his advice is not wasted. A third prisoner, a boy of fourteen or fifteen arrested for stealing cakes, joins Lewis and Hattie. By this point late in the story, Gaines has had Lewis recollect the fight and killing, gradually reading his own future in Munford Bazille's grizzled face. He accepts the man as truthful, decides to refuse bonding-out, and then assumes Bazille's role in dealing harshly with the new boy. Again, Gaines invests the end of Procter Lewis's night with a strong sense of ritual, as his actions bear much more than individual significance. Lewis seems to become a better Munford Bazille. "Deep in me I felt some kind of love for this little boy," he admits, and awakens the crying boy rudely to some semblance of self-respect.

The boy is frightened, as Lewis "at first violent, bullying him into accepting responsibility for his crimes. And then, puzzled, as Lewis orders him to pray: "'I don't believe in God . . . But I want you to believe. I want you to believe He can hear you. That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings—with you praying' " (p. 158). Like Bazille, he is a bloodline, a living graph of past and future, and his disgust gives way to affection, dramatized in the small, intimate ritual ceremony of tending the boy's wounds: "'I wet my handkerchief and dabbed at the bruises. Every time I touched his back, he flinched. But I didn't let that stop me. I washed his back good and clean. When I got through, I told him to go back to his bunk and lay down. Then I rinsed out his shirt and spread it out on the foot of my bunk. I took off my own shirt and rinsed it out because it was filthy'" (pp. 154-55).

What we are given in this hard-boiled and understated tale is a solid truth. True community, in its most supportive and nourishing aspects, is fragile and organic. What we see implicitly in "Three Men" is that it is possible and can be birthed in the most unlikely places, that it is natural and tropistic, and that it evolves from a collective sense of dignity and personal and social past, just as surely as a plant turns to catch the sun and water evaporates to the upper airs.

"Just Like a Tree" is a fitting endpiece for *Bloodline*. Gaines's first published work, it is one of his most assured and moving stories, and it makes fullest use of Afro-American oral and rhetorical folk materials. The title is taken from an old black
The story is made of ten overlapping first-person accounts—by Black and White, young and old, sympathetic and cynical—spanning the events of a family farewell supper for the statelest of Gaines’s matriarchs, Aunt Fe. While she does not speak directly, her being is refracted powerfully through the accounts, and she serves as a fictional center. The story line is easily reconstructed: a civil rights movement flourishes in a rural Louisiana county, and “redneck” Whites bomb a house as a warning. Fearful that she will be injured, the family decides that Aunt Fe must indeed be moved, north, to live with her daughter. They gather on this stormy evening for one last family celebration.

As in other Bloodline stories, there are clear conflicts in “Just Like a Tree.” Most blatantly, a racial struggle exists between Blacks led in civil disobedience by Emmanuel, and poor Whites are outraged at the Blacks’ wish for liberation. But a conflict between black generations is more pervasive, as Emmanuel finds himself bitterly chastised during the evening, blamed for causing the trouble that forces Fe north. Emmanuel’s defense is delivered through Etienne’s commentary, and it is clear that his leadership is motivated by love, and by a strong sense of historical obligation:

“I love you Aunt Fe, much as I do my own parents. . . . I’m going to miss you. . . . but I’m not going to stop what I’ve started. You told me a story once, Aunt Fe, about my great-grandpa. Remember? Remember how he died? . . . Remember how they lynched him—chopped him into pieces? . . . Just the two of us were sitting here beside the fire when you told me that. I was so angry I felt like killing. But it was you who told me to get killing out of my mind . . . told me I would only bring harm to myself and sadness to the others if I killed. Do you remember that, Aunt Fe? . . . You were right. We cannot raise our arms. Because it would mean death for ourselves, as well as for the others. But we’ll do something else—and that’s what we will do.” (Pp. 246-47)

This first of Ernest Gaines’s writings is, significantly, a paean to one of his enduring “Aunts,” and her importance is greater here than in any other work. Fe is described in organic terms; and like the tree in the spiritual, she will indeed be physically moved when her time arrives. It seems cruel to the family that she must migrate, and while she is stoic during the evening, she gives way to her fears later. She is making the same trip slaves made a hundred years earlier, but now it seems wrong, appears a violation of natural order. Aunt Clo, one of her nearest friends, summarizes the nature of this violation. Her section is masterfully written, and the tang of her figures and language evokes a black oral past, suggesting other times when truths have been told at a drafty cabin fireside:

Be just like wrapping a chain round a tree and jecking and jecking. . . . Jeck, jeck, jeck. Then you hear the roots crying, and then you keep on jecking, and then it give, and you jeck some mo’, and then it falls. And not till then do you see what you done done. Not till then you see the big hole in the ground and piece of the taproot still way down in it—and piece you won’t never get out no matter if you dig till doomsday. . . . You never get the taproot. But, sir, I tell you what you do get. You get a big hole in the ground, sir; and you get another big hole in the air where the lovely branches been all these years. Yes sir, that’s what you get. The holes, sir, the holes. Two holes, sir, you can’t never fill no matter how hard you try. (Pp. 235-36)

Aunt Clo’s monologue later stresses the brutality of Fe’s being uprooted, a distinctly unnatural development, for she cannot relate the North to any sort of organic existence. Dragged there, Fe will perish. But the extended image she draws of this old woman—as a living creature, a taproot, whose presence can never be undone—is striking and appropriate. And the “two holes,” in the ground and in the air, “are not merely absences, emptinesses. They are active, and seem to suggest that Fe’s being does not perish, but rather is retained as a powerful memory, an immediate and felt history, a bloodline to nourish later Emmanuels.
The emphasis in "Just Like a Tree" is not on conflict, but rather on reconciliation. Gaines’s final comment on Aunt Fe’s importance is an expression of his most sweeping historical vision. The language and rhythms of Etienne’s testimony grow from the Bible and the folk sermon; this is a cosmic vision, simply and dramatically built, and it resolves all of the apparent conflicts and contradictions between people and races and eras.

And it takes us further, suggests that like the vast natural turnings (as in the wind on the water), there is a pattern in the growth of peoples and communities, that a single human tragedy can nourish a greater communal birth. “Three Men” signals the future way for young black manhood; “Just Like a Tree” is an homage to the being of an old black woman. They are part of a larger process, as Etienne tells us, “’Cause . . . that’s what life is. . . . ’Cause tomorrow will he [sic] his time to be turned over just like it’s hers today. And after that, be somebody else time to turn over. And it keep going like that till it ain’t nothing left to turn—and nobody left to turn it” (p. 245).

D. History Is Your People’s Bones:
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

“This earth is yours and don’t let that man out there take it from you,” he said. “It’s yours because your people’s bones lays in it; it’s yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth. The white man will use every trick in the trade to take it from you. He will use every way he know how to get you wool-gathered. He’ll turn you ‘gainst each other. But remember this,” he said. “Your people’s bones and their dust make this place yours more than anything else.”

... Your people plowed this earth, your people chopped down the trees, your people built the roads and built the levees. These same people is now buried in this earth, and their bones’ fertilizing this earth.” (AMJP, pp. 107-08)

The dust that drifts through Catherine Carmier is what remains of a dead past, stifling . Jackson Bradley. But for Miss Jane Pittman, the dust is alive, a viable reminder of the price paid by her black ancestors for their own meager freedom—and of the price paid by those younger than her, such as her adopted son Ned Douglass, shot down by a hired white murderer. The headnote for this section is taken from Ned’s last sermon on the St. Charles River, and lest we overlook his message, Jane drives it home at his graveside: “I remember my old mistress, when she saw the young Secesh soldiers, saying: ‘The precious blood of the South, the precious blood of the South.’ Well, there on that river bank is the precious dust of this South. And he is there for all to see” (p. 113).

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is fiction masquerading as autobiography, but mostly, it is a powerful folk history of Afro-American life from the Civil War to the mid-1960s. If such comparisons are helpful, it is a novel and a racial repository as well, sui generis like W. E. B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk and Jean Toomer’s Cane. Jane Pittman’s life is a framing metaphor, complex and vibrant, like Toomer’s sugar cane. Her life and his field are poetically imagined, specific and concrete; people go in and out of them, they can be sweet and raw, can harbor love and lust, spawn tragedy and hatred. And like DuBois and Toomer, Ernest Gaines taps the languages and forms and powers of black folk-rooted art forms. The bones of his book are communal, oral and rhetorical: spirituals, black folk sermons, slave narratives, biblical parables, folk tales, and primitive myths. These are spoken, declaimed forms, issuing from a collective human voice. As the putative “editor” tells us in his “Introduction,” the novel is built on a series of interviews with Miss Jane Pittman, a one hundred-ten-year-old former slave, and many of her friends. The “friends” is important, for her being is truly a repository of Southern black life since the Civil War. As our editor notes of those “wonderful people”: and their relation to Miss Jane, “Miss Jane’s story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane’s!” (p. x).

There are four sections to Miss Jane Pittman: “The War Years,” covering the years 1865-1866 and the child Ticey’s (Jane’s slave name) wanderings as a newly-freed slave; “Reconstruction,” extending from 1876-circa 1912, in which Reconstruction falls, Jane is married, and loses her husband—one of the early black cowboys—and her adopted son; “The Plantation,” moving from 1912-the 1930s, during which she comes to Samson Plantation and experiences the very different declines of poor Blacks and ruling Whites; and “The Quarters,” an unbroken memoir running from the 1930s to the book’s present, drawing events of those years about the life of Jimmy Aaron, “The One.” Summary serves few fictions well, and here it is particularly inappropriate. The power of the book lies precisely in the way Gaines dramatizes concretely a vision of human history and black community, and so thoroughly absorbs his materials and their modes of expression, that what results is a truly unique creation. But there are deep structures and patterns of experience that we might examine with minimal reduction.

The informing vision behind the events of Jane’s life is a cosmic resolution of a different sort than that expressed by Etienne in “Just Like a Tree”; mainly, it offers greater hope for man in the here-and-now, and reconciles black generations through a common course for human dignity through social action. It is summarized best in Ned Douglass’s riverbank sermon. Rescued by Jane at age four, he watches enraged “patrollers” beat and dismember a band of wandering ex-slaves, including his mother. Ned goes on, and along with Jimmy Aaron in a later section, serves as “The One” for his own time and people. He is born to lead, and true to his surname, is a black renaissance man of sorts: teacher, preacher, architect, martyr. On this cool Sunday morning, he preaches at the St. Charles River near Bayonne, and his killers sit quietly in a rowboat offshore, straining for proof to effect his murder. As the headnote to this section suggests,
Douglass's text is on redeeming a black birthright. He urges Blacks not to migrate—to Canada, or Africa, or South America—and asserts that this country has been built of their bodies and souls. "I'm as much American as any man; I'm more American than most" (p. 109), he argues, but he insists that one's birthright must be claimed in dignity. There are shades of darkness and degrees of manhood, but the latter has little to do with race:"

"Be Americans. . . . But first be men. Look inside yourself. Say 'What am I? What else beside this black skin that the white man call nigger?' Do you know what a nigger is? . . . First, a nigger feels below anybody else on earth. He's been beaten so much by the white man, he don't care for himself, for nobody else, and for nothing else. . . . But there's a big difference between a nigger and a black American. A black American cares, and will always struggle. Every day that he get up he hopes that this day will be better. The nigger knows it won't. . . . I want my children to fight. Fight for all—not just for a corner. The black man or white man who tell you to stay in a corner want to keep your mind in a corner too." (P. 110)

Ned's counsel at the river is a key to understanding the ways of three heroic black men that stand out in Miss Jane Pittman. The first is Ned Douglass himself. "People's always looking for somebody to come lead them. . . . Anybody a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One" (p. 197). Jane's remarks open "The Quarters," but apply to Ned some thirty-five years earlier. An unlikely One he sensed his duty as a black man at a young age. As we read through each incident, he is fully conscious, performing what seem to be fated obligations. In retrospect, he may be seen as a basic element in Gaines's vision of Afro-American history. Jane pleads with him to stay home. But he senses that a slave can have no true homeland, and moves actively, toward an unknown future. Working first with Whites, resettling former slaves, and later with his own Southern black people, he is pursued constantly, and realizes that he cannot live very long.

Like DuBois, Ned envisions a pluralistic America. But he is properly suspicious of the white man, warning that he "will use every trick in the trade to take it from you" (p. 107). Ned's suspicions of Whites are quite appropriate. In what is one of the most remarkable sections of the novel, "Reconstruction," we read of Ned's achievements and his killing. Through his murderer, Albert Cluveau—a sort of inhuman savant obsessed with the many killings he performs—Gaines invests much of his auctorial sense of ambivalence and retribution. As Jane recalls him: "Sometimes I got him off talking about killing. I would make him talk about fishing and raising crop. He could talk about anything. . . . But in the end killing always came back in Albert Cluveau's mind. He wasn't bragging about it, and he wasn't sorry either. It was just conversation. Like if you worked in the sawmill you talked about lumber more than you talked about cane. . . . Albert Cluveau had killed so many people he couldn't talk about nothing else but that" (p. 169). Cluveau is an unsettling creation. "When he tells Jane he must kill Ned if he is ordered, he cannot understand her anger or shock. As his name suggests, he is literally an instrument, and in him we see a prevalent emphasis on "Them"—those with wealth and power, and most often white, who kill to preserve their status. "They" are responsible not only for Ned's death, but Jimmy Aaron's, too, and Huey Long's. Of Long's death, Jane notes tersely: "Look like every man that pick up the cross for the poor must end that way" (p. 150). Cluveau, like many other Whites in this book, is a clearer, mechanical. It is their function to blight and cut the natural, seen here in the growth of black manhood. In Jane's mind, Indians and Blacks have natural totems, sacred phenomena with which they can commune. For the earliest Americans, it was the river; for the Blacks following them, the oak tree. But for the white man—first seen as the French—it is his fate to be the levee, various human versions of the concrete spillways that possess the rivers and cut man off from the natural sources of life.

Later in the novel, Jimmy Aaron is another strong, young black leader. It is his function to lead toward an unknown future, and his leadership is not what the conservative church elders wish from "The One." He is political, organizes a demonstration in Bayonne and is shot to death for his efforts. But in the actions of Aaron and Douglass, Gaines suggests that black political activity, however individually threatening, is natural and necessary, a move historically and humanly consequent from the past. At the opening of the novel, Uncle Isom urges all newly-freed slaves to stay at the plantation, not to separate the tribe. Led by Ticy and Ned, the young people walk ignorantly into a mysterious and dangerous world. Near the end, the church elders again counsel staying at home, rebuff Aaron and his plea for support. But Jane, like Uncle Isom, urges that young and old not part. But she does so in following Jimmy Aaron's spirit into Bayonne to lead a freedom march, and so doing, knits up past and present again, so they can blend into a future.

Jane's husband, Joe Pittman, is the third strong black figure in her life. After they settle in Texas, Jane fears for his life, and goes to a hoo-doo, Madame Eloise Gautier. Madame Gautier is a seer, and she confirms Jane's fear that Joe will die. More, she explains the obligations of black manhood in another sense. Not only historical and political, they are existential and supremely individual as well: "That's man's way. To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove he is a man. . . . If not the horse, then the lion, if not the lion, then the woman, if not the woman, then the war, then the politics, then the whisky. Man must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him" (pp. 93-94).

Madame Gautier also defines the feminine principle in this world. If man must go forward, risking himself
and living for a shorter, brighter time, the woman must endure and sustain her people. Man dies in opening the future; and while woman seems to sense intuitively that he will be destroyed, she is powerless to stop him. It falls her lot to watch and remember, at all costs to remember—as Jane does so well—and to walk through the doors opened for her. My implication here is neither chauvinistic nor racist, not to say this is a subversive role, as the dramatically understated conclusion of the novel reveals: “Me and Robert [her white landlord] looked at each other there a long time, then I went by him” (p. 244).

As I suggest earlier, the power of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman does not lie in the patterns and motifs of recurring characters, actions, themes. There are familiar patterns, to be sure: black leaders are consistently thrust up, only to be slain and dash the hopes they inspired; and again and again, teachers are important to allow his material its own natural course—indeed the richness of the fiction lies in the momentum eddies and pools into which the narrative stream is deflected. When Gaines speaks of Richard Wright’s decline, he attributes it to an inability to continue writing from a black “American soil, not out of a European library.” In his own writing, he demonstrates his strong suspicion that the traditional techniques of the novel are too analytical, schematic, do not properly define his materials or express his vision of the natural history of black people. Gaines seems to agree with his contemporary William Melvin Kelley’s assessment that “to carry the weight of our ideas, the novel has got to be changed. We are trying to tap some new things in a form which is not our form.”

That power lies in Gaines’s careful assimilation of Afro-American folk materials, particularly those of the South, in which his historical vision is absorbed and vivified. His debt is to the rich fund of customs and folkways of black American pasts, to the unique forms grown out of them— to the spirituals, determination songs; church music like Jane’s “Done Got Over,” urging a rock-like perseverance even as “they tell,” heard by W.E.B. DuBois, “of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.” From the church he also draws on folk sermons and church talks, adapting them to his own more secular uses; to these, a debt for the compelling rhetorical power running through Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron, and a broad, historical apology for pain and suffering. And to slave narratives—like that of Frederick Douglass—testifying to the moral diseases incipient in human bondage, and to the psychic devastations resulting in both Black (Black Harriet) and White (Cluveau and Tee Bob). A more regional Louisiana folk heritage is spun out in the presence of hoo-doo Madame Eloise Gautier and the many webs of prophecies bound in dreams, visions, superstitions. Their presences suggest a world alive and mysterious beyond our own, and are borne earlier in the folk tale, as in the remarkable account of Albert Cluveau’s suffering and death, “The Chariot of Hell.” Many of Gaines’s figures are familiar to black myth: Singalee Black Harriet and her return to the shelter of her homeland via insanity; the hunter in search of his mother, pausing in the swamps to trap food for Ticey and Ned. To this rich stream, played through Gaines’s own shaping contemporary imagination, we owe the spectrum of Afro-American life and language set loose in Miss Jane Pittman.

His direct concern with history and those who record it is apparent from the start. The putative “editor” is a teacher of history, and explains to Jane and her friends that her life will help students to better learn their lessons. “‘What’s wrong with them books you already got?’” her friend asks, “‘Miss Jane is not in them,’” is his reply (p. viii). Teachers are important throughout Jane’s story, and good ones such as Ned Douglass and Mary LeFabre are treasures; the lessers, like Miss Lily and Joe Hardy, are quietly indicted—and damned simply—as being among “the worst human beings I’ve ever met” (p. 154).

But it is not easy to teach: we are often reminded of the difficulty of knowing a truth, of daring a vision of history. Jane is first made aware of this painful fact by a riddling old man in whom a world of mystery was refracted. Discouraging her trek to Ohio in search of a kind “Yankee soldier name Brown,” he images a detailed and exhausting account of her fruitless travels, concluding: “And the only white Brown people can remember that ever went to Luzana to fight in the war died of whiskey ten years ago. They don’t think he was the same person you was looking for because this Brown wasn’t kind to nobody. He was coarse and vulgar; he cussed man, God, and nature.
every day of his life' " (p. 54). And as long as man can speak it and shape it, history can deceive, can be a weapon against one's foes. Remembering Herbert Aptheker's adage that "History is mighty," especially for the oppressor, we listen to Jules Raynard's account of Robert Samson's suicide. His reading of the past is historically myopic, consciously blurring the pattern of cause and effect. In his account of slavery, for example, the lion and the lamb lie down together, and each is equally guilty and helpless before the fated retribution for the sins of a common past. Raynard drives Jane home from the plantation to the old slave quarters, and she listens quietly from a back seat, suspicious of his version of "the gospel truth." For all his decency, Raynard is still another white man whose dream of the past makes those in the present impotent; history is a wall for him, before which master and servant can do little but surrender.

For Ernest J. Gaines, like his creation Jimmy Aaron, there is immense power in language, and its use is a sacred trust. And like Aaron, he assumes his obligations cautiously and naturally. Aaron's simple skills to read and write family letters and papers, and his rhetorical talents that serve him later; Gaines's powers to create fiction: each is a way a people are preserved, a heritage passed on. Ned Douglass's last text is a popular folk sermon, adapted from the "Vision of Dry Bones," in Ezekiel, in which it is taught that words bring a past to life, put flesh on bones and a seed in the soil. "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say. Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off" (Ezekiel 37:11). Ernest Gaines writes from this lament, and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, his finest work, is his mighty attempt to open the graves, make these bones live, and re-unite a people.

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NOTES

1 I refer to the standard editions of Gaines's novels: Catherine Carmier (New York: Atheneum, 1964); Of Love and Dust (New York: Dial Press, 1967); Bloodline (New York: Dial Press, 1968); The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (New York: Dial Press, 1972). All references are to these editions and are parenthetically noted in the text.


3 Ernest J. Gaines, quoted by Hoyt W. Fuller, "Black Writer's Views on Literary Lions and Values," Negro Digest, 17 (January 1968), 27.
