HEARING IS BELIEVING: THE LANDSCAPE OF VOICE IN ERNEST GAINES'S BLOODLINE

by John F. Callahan

The way home we seek is that condition of being at home in the world which is called love and which we term democracy.

—Ralph Ellison

I

"Usually," Ernest Gaines has said, "once I develop a character and hear his voice, I can let him tell the story. My writing is strongest when I do that."1 Gaines's voice invites belief, and, as Michael Harper wrote in his poem for Gaines, because "one gets the flow/. . . ., we must believe the writer,/so I believe."2 Authenticity is the starting point, and Gaines is as scrupulous about the accuracy, the rightness of his characters' speech as anyone writing today. But voice involves much more than getting down a character's way of talking. Voice is Gaines's donnée, and as such in his fiction voice becomes form's heartbeat.

Gaines's best stories compel belief in his Louisiana world partly because they are told by people who are both characters and storytellers.3 And Gaines knows that each role flavors and complicates the other. Respectful as he is toward storytellers and the oral tradition, Gaines never fails to emphasize the essential dimension of form always facing the writer. "We can go down the block right now," he told one interviewer from the window of his San Francisco apartment in a mostly black neighborhood, "and find a guy on the next corner who'll tell the biggest and truest story you can ever hear. Now, putting that story down on paper so that a million people can read, and feel, and hear it like you on that street corner, that's going to take form. That's writing."4 So a long, true story is not fiction. Form makes a story fiction (writing), and so Gaines insists that only craft and artifice make fiction out of the endless stories one hears and tells. "If a book doesn't have form, then damn, it ain't no novel," he insists in the same interview. He raises his voice because he knows so well the demands of craft—"that same pain, that same pleasure" Ralph Ellison names the repeated acts of complexity dared by the writer of fiction.5

There are times when Gaines wishes for an easier way, as, no doubt, every writer does at those times when the writing does not go well or, worse, does not go at all. "Now maybe what I need to do," he told Charles Rowell, editor of Callaloo, "is sit in a chair on a stage and just tell people stories rather than try to write them." As he continues, you
hear Gaines's wrenching, painful, arduously self-made transition from storyteller to writer. You feel the pull of the past, the oral tradition of the old folks whose stories he heard as a boy, and an earlier literary time when storytelling seemed form enough. “I wish I could be paid just to sit around and tell stories, and forget the writing stuff. But, unfortunately, I am a writer, and I must communicate with the written word.” For Gaines as for his character/storytellers, form is bound up with identity, and both flow from voice. I write, therefore I am, Gaines might as well have said. His passage from doubtful skepticism to the certainty and finality of vocation reminds me of the Cartesian leap to self (and form). Writing is for him an imperative of being. But what qualities does Gaines think a writer ought to bring to the act of storytelling? Clearly, he prefers to give up little or nothing of the old heritage. He imbues the written word with the force of Afro-American oral traditions. He complicates the challenge of form because he overlays the idiosyncratic personal voices of individuals upon the communal tradition of storytelling. “Usually,” he admits, “I think of myself as a storyteller. I would like for readers to look at a person telling the story from the first person point of view as someone actually telling them a story at the time.” In the first place Gaines is a storyteller. In the second place he is a writer who seeks a condition of time similar to what Gertrude Stein called the continuing present. I mean that double-consciousness of things happening and perceived happening, simultaneously. This act of the present between writer and reader derives somewhat from the immediacy of contact that existed between the most accomplished storytellers and their audience in the storytelling of the oral tradition. In Gaines’s work, voice bears the burden of bringing the immediacy of the spoken word to the literary form of fiction. “That’s writing.”

There is something else going on too. For Gaines the spoken word and the oral tradition refer to a world of Afro-American kinship ties based as much on speaking and hearing as on blood. This is why he so often tells his stories from the perspective and in the voice of someone who participates in and makes the story happen as well as tells it. As he develops a character, conventions of knowing and seeing yield to the prior necessity of hearing the character’s voice. Even though Gaines works in the medium of writing where words are seen on the page, he sets himself the task of changing seeing is believing to hearing is believing. Hearing his character’s voice, Gaines the writer becomes free enough to liberate his character so that he “can let him tell the story.” According to Gaines’s view of fiction and its requirements of narrative form, for the writer to be free, his characters must be free, and voice is the first test of freedom.
This is an essential point to grasp about Gaines's work. Speech and the larger matter of voice are bound up with freedom, and freedom is bound up with change. And voice becomes a transforming agent in Gaines's enactment of the twin themes of Afro-American identity and aspiration. Voice allows the characters he invents to follow their independent lives and destinies. Gaines prefers to turn over the stories he writes to his characters to tell, because for him, the test of a character's autonomy (and his, the writer's craft) lies in the character's voice. There is another reason specific to Gaines that voice is so bound up with form. Unlike Ellison's character/narrator, Invisible Man, the people Gaines invests with the rights and responsibilities of storytelling do not undergo a transition from speaker to writer, from oral to literary tradition. Yes, they witness, experience, and sometimes spur on change—Gaines's obsessive theme. But the idiom of his characters changes little; instead, speech stabilizes their lives and helps them participate in and cope with the changes that are coming in what one of them calls "the scheme of things." Voice is an anchor for those black lives Gaines brings to the page through the breath of his storytellers.

Consider again how Gaines describes his fate: "unfortunately, I am a writer, and I must communicate with the written word." He is caught between traditions, between forms, and he experiences something close to what Thomas Kuhn calls the "essential tension" between "convergent" and "divergent" approaches to his craft. Gaines's time is that turning point in Southern history when a social order, largely defined by fixed relations between blacks and whites, is about to open up and change. His time in Louisiana—1933-1948—goes back before that turning point. The form of communication Gaines absorbed as a boy was oral; he learned about people and the world by hearing the old (and not so old) folks talk on the gallery outside his crippled Aunt Augusteen's cabin. These voices are touchstones to his memories, and these oral performances were how people presented themselves and their stories in the quarters of rural parishes going back to slavery days. But only through the artifice of the written word can Gaines introduce strangers to this Louisiana world. The audience for his fiction must read and see before it can hear voices from this world. To return to Kuhn's paradigm, the paradox is that Gaines diverges from the spoken to the written word in order to compel readers into an imaginative convergence with the oral ways of his characters and their stories.

Little wonder Gaines wishes he "could be paid just to sit around and tell stories." Writing involves performance too, but the action is of a different kind. Writing is talking to oneself—a solitary struggle, sometimes painful, sometimes exhilarating. As a writer, Gaines depends on mind and memory for the community of audience he grew up with as a child. For the writer there is no audience whose energy flows toward
(or away from) the storyteller or speaker to fill him up (or drain him). Likewise, what strikes me about the stories in Gaines’s *Bloodline* is that none has an audience. No one appears to be present except the character telling the story. Gaines does not have the stories told in a dramatic context. Neither does he invoke any of the devices by which a character writes down his story in order to reach certain people. And another thing: in *Bloodline* each voice is highly distinct as well as distinctive. Gaines’s strategy differs from that of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, a novel whose story and voice belong to the participating community as well as to Miss Jane. In the stories of *Bloodline* idiom is still shared; black and also white tongues are flavored by different spices from the same dish: Louisiana gumbo. But the narrative voices stress the working out of the problem of self. And this problem is perhaps similar to what Gaines has spoken of as the problem of the writer. In both cases identity is the destination. And the conveyance is form. Gaines’s authenticity as a writer depends on his ability to give distinct form to the stories he tells. And his character/narrators use the act of storytelling as a way of giving form to themselves. Shaping one’s voice is a way of shaping one’s life, and both involve the struggle for form.

Earlier I said that the spoken idioms of Gaines’s characters remain consistent within each story. True enough and important; still, idiom functions as a constant within that larger, encompassing variable of voice. In fiction, voice enacts the range and nuances of expression that testify to the quality of a character’s responsiveness. Certainly in the first three stories and somewhat in “Bloodline,” voice marks a coming together of the character’s identity. There is, perhaps, to play off Ellison’s metaphor of frequencies, a lower frequency of continuing, anchoring tones or characteristics of expression. But the complication lies in something else, in an individual’s power (and quality) of modulation. This is another way of linking voice to the endless changes personalities go through as they encounter the world and come back to look within and find themselves changed. Voice is also a name for the rhetorical strategies an individual brings to his presentation of self; in Gaines’s sense of the term, voice registers a person’s impact on the world.

Above all, voice presupposes the articulate self, a self capable of form. This link between voice and form explains why Gaines is ready for a character to tell his story only when he, Gaines the writer, hears and recognizes the character’s voice, for voice is the key to the identity as well as the stories of the articulate personality. Voice is bound up with a storyteller’s (and character’s) responsiveness. Voice shapes and articulates what Kate Chopin in her American classic, *The Awakening*, called that point in life when a person is “beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations
as an individual to the world within and about her.” Once Gaines turns a story over to his character, voice becomes the bridge between that individual’s inner and outer world.

All these complexities of voice fuse in Gaines’s theme of personal and social change. (And one needs some mastery over form to become more than a spectator in the arena of history). In the voices of Bloodline, there is a resilience, a fluidity which increases as the world becomes a more and more complex and dangerous place. In each story the storyteller’s voice (in “Just Like A Tree” there are ten voices) modulates his sense of “the scheme of things” in rural Louisiana, before the social changes of the ‘60’s and early ‘70’s. A social order is beginning to crumble. In his sense of the slowness of time Gaines shows affinity with the Russian realists of the 19th century for whom the slowness of change seemed to confirm the depth and intensity of what was coming. About society Gaines never cheats. A social and economic order as long-lasting and powerful as the deep South’s system of peonage does not dissipate overnight. Nevertheless, there are eventually changes. Gaines’s fiction occupies the space between his observation that very little changed in his backwater parish from the Civil War until after his departure in the late ’40’s and his counter observation that Louisiana could not much longer resist the social and racial changes of the ‘50’s and ‘60’s. So his fiction renders turning points of self and society, and for his characters voice is the test of a person’s integrity and force in the world.

II

The impact of Gaines’s work derives from a paradox. He has followed social change in the South from San Francisco, half a world away, and kept in touch through yearly visits to his old town of New Roads. But the perspective in his fiction—his composite sense of the natural, moral, and historical landscape—follows from knowledge and experience of the place in a time when the social order seemed impervious to change. To break the grip of the past, one got away by literally going away. Sometimes in his fiction Gaines writes of a person trying to anticipate history’s flood tide, to force changes in the scheme of things. He creates individuals ahead of time and history whose efforts, though they fall short of the character’s aspirations, do nudge the social moraine ahead a little faster and a little farther than otherwise would have been the case. In Gaines’s view—a view embodied by characters in tune with time like Jane Pittman, characters whose actions coincide with history’s readiness—such slight accelerations are the most individuals can hope for. Sometimes too, resistance to the heralds of change signifies the very power and possibility of change. Some of Gaines’s white characters,
like Frank Laurent in "Bloodline," do not contest the fact of change, only its timing. Let things hold till I’m gone, he says, and in this way he and others like him tip the scales down toward change.

As a collection, the Bloodline stories conjure up Gaines’s favorite paraphrase of William Faulkner: “the past ain’t dead; it ain’t even passed.”10 Always, whether the storyteller is six-year-old Sonny in “A Long Day in November” or seventy-year-old Felix in ‘Bloodline,” Gaines explores the place of individual action in the scheme of things. The first of these stories written, “A Long Day in November,” was worked and reworked while Gaines was a student at San Francisco State and Stanford in the late ‘50’s and early ‘60’s. The story follows Gaines’s “coming back” to Louisiana “to absorb things,” and does so through the voice and experience of a six-year-old boy.11 It is a deceptively simple, subtle self-account of Sonny’s passage toward engagement with the world. Gaines’s view of a child’s responsibility, derived no doubt from his own childhood, is both comic and rigorous. Sure, Sonny would rather stay warm in bed than get up and go out back to wee-wee in the cold. But his mother refuses him that option, and with this trivial incident the story launches his journey to initiation and love, toward what Ralph Ellison called “that condition of being at home in the world.”12

Throughout, Gaines sustains a voice faithful to Sonny’s six-year-old way of absorbing what’s outside into himself:

Somebody is shaking me but I don’t want get up now, because I’m tired and I’m sleepy and I don’t want get up now. It’s warm under the cover here, but it’s cold up there and I don’t want get up now.13

Until the end Sonny’s sense of time and reality reflects things only as they happen. His task, worked out in the immediate present of sensation, is to locate himself. He needs first to map out the world of home and parents. Gradually, and of necessity, his world extends out to other persons and places in the Negro community before he returns home with wholeness and well-being, and not least the sexual love between his parents, restored.

At first, Sonny inhabits a cocoon of sensation. He’s warm under the covers. Out there it’s cold, and it signifies the world. Someone calls him. He’s home, so it must be Mama. Now Sonny’s narrow six-year-old’s view of a human being comes into focus, as he starts to think of Paul the pig out in the freezing yard. Just what is the difference between a little boy and a pig? Already, comically, Sonny voices the rudiments of discrimination. “I’m sure glad I ain’t no pig,” he tells himself. Why? “They ain’t got no mama and no daddy and no house” (p. 9). Of course, he’s wrong and he’s right. What he counts on is home
in Ellison’s sense of being at home in the world through love, and Son- 
ny is moving from sensation to judgement. After his father works him 
over with candy and asks if he loves his daddy, Sonny, attuned to the 
trouble between his parents, puts his love for his father in a context 
shaped by his experience. “I love Mama, too. I love her more than I 
love you” (p. 15).

This sense of being at home in his small world goes out of whack 
for Sonny. It is up to the story’s passage (and Sonny’s act of storytell- 
ing) to put things right again. The first thing Sonny learns is that things 
don’t always go back together naturally. The rift between his father 
and mother will not heal by itself. The journey to that home of restored 
love takes Sonny and his mother and father into the Negro communi-
ty outside the immediate family. And Gaines does not romanticize the 
extended family; there are dangerous and sinister intentions at work 
here. For instance, when Sonny’s mother takes herself and him down 
the road to her mother’s place, there, before her daughter’s tears dry, 
Gran’mon brings in another man as replacement for her daughter’s hus-
band. Not only that, she gives them a room to themselves and invites 
things to take their course. Sonny observes all this because as Jean 
Toomer wrote in “Karintha” in the 20’s, in this rural Negro world of 
two-and three-room cabins, love and death and fighting happen in front 
of children. There is no hiding place. To accentuate Gran’mon’s power 
and determination, when Sonny’s father appears at her door, she fires 
a shotgun over his head and drives him off.

Going to the outhouse a little later on, Sonny is intercepted by his 
father who takes him along on visitations to two polar presences in 
the community: the minister and the hoodoo woman. In all this Sonny 
undergoes initiation into the different voices around him. Throughout, 
Gaines endows Sonny with a keen ear as if what he hears will lie less 
than what he sees.

First, the preacher and Sonny’s father:

“I tried, son,” Reverend Simmons says. “Now we’ll leave it in 
God’s hand.”

“But I want my wife back now,” Daddy says. “God takes so 
long to—”

“Mr. Howard, that’s blasphemous,” Reverend Simmons says. 
I’m in a big mess. I want my wife.”

“I’d suggest you kneel down sometime,” Reverend Simmons 
says. “That always helps in a family” (p.44).

How Reverend Simmons talks is as important as what he says and does 
not say. His tone is alternately patronizing and shocked, bullying and
cynical. He intends to distance himself from Eddie Howard's request for help. Enough has been shown of Sister Rachel, as Reverend Simmons calls Sonny's grandmother, to suggest her importance in his congregation or anywhere else she puts her considerable weight. In any case Simmons' tag line—"That always helps in a family"—cynically substitutes an empty formula for the personal intervention Sonny's father feels he has a right to expect from his minister.

The second stop is Madame Toussaint's cabin. Unlike Reverend Simmons, she is fearful to Sonny because all the rumors about her, however far-fetched, credit her with the direct exercise of power. She schools Sonny in the imbalance afflicting his world and the big world as well. Again, he absorbs her point of view more from hearing than from seeing. Her voice drives home what lies behind women's tenacious, domestic use of power. "You men done messed up the outside world so bad that they [women] feel lost and out of place in it. Her house is her world. Only there she can do what she want" (p. 61). And in the story's world women indeed call the tune, even to the extent of Sonny's mother forcing his father to beat her so she won't be said to live with "the laughingstock of the plantation" (p. 75). Reversals of conventional relations between men and women are acted out throughout "A Long Day in November." In the episode at hand, Madame Toussaint instructs Sonny's father (and Sonny) in the subtle possibilities of voice.

Comically, she gives Sonny's father partial advice for his seventy-five cents, two and a quarter shy of her standard three dollar fee. "Get rid of it," she tells him, but apparently he cannot figure out her message. Not willing to play for free, she makes him return with the other $2.25, and riled up, she toughens the sentence. "Go set fire to your car" (p.60). Meant for Sonny as much as for his father, her lesson is that folks had better understand the implication of voice. "Get rid of it," after all, leaves Eddie Howard room to maneuver; he is still free to sell his car and recoup his loss. But Madame Toussaint's command to burn up the car amounts to a ritual of humiliation, though it serves the greater good of his wife's return. Still, Madame Toussaint has taken Eddie Howard to school, and the drill for the day is that even more than seeing, hearing is believing.

The last turnabout is that Madame Toussaint's three dollar advice improves Eddie's standing in the community. If he'd merely sold his car, his mother-in-law, Sister Rachel, would never have thought, never mind said these words:

"I just do declare," Gran'mon says. "I must be dreaming. He's a man after all"(p.71).
Others in the community friendly to Eddie but aware of him as a lightweight voice this same perspective about his change:

"Never thought that was in Eddie," somebody says real low.  
"You not the only one," somebody else says.  
"He loved that car more than he loved anything."
"No, he must love her more," another person says (p.72).

For Sonny listening, these voices corroborate the growing impression that Eddie Howard is a manchild and that the story is not about Sonny growing up as much as about his father growing up so that Sonny will be free to play and develop under what D. H. Lawrence called the arch created by the two separate strong pillars of father and mother. 14

The process is arduous and continuing. Back with his wife and Sonny, Eddie tries to shirk going to talk to Sonny's teacher at school, but his wife no longer lets him off the hook:

"Honey, you know I don't know how to act in no place like that," Daddy says.
"Time to learn," Mama says (p.76).

As he witnesses his father dragged into the new territory of manhood, Sonny, at six, absorbs the signs and voices around him. He grows into a person who realizes that his ability to interpret home and the world makes him a responsible member of his family and the community. In the last paragraph his voice leaps toward a series of progressions familiar in jazz and, for that matter, common to the tradition of oral improvisation in Afro-American sermons and tale-telling. Sonny's transformation also recalls the narrator's sudden comprehension at the end of Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" that his brother's instrumental voice forges identity and freedom out of kinship and "that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did." 15

Now, at the end of "A Long Day in November," Sonny plays a blues, and in his solo there is a progression that gives his voice a special and distinct quality. For one thing his sense of time explodes from a child's sense of a single, simple present into apprehension of the past in the present of his storytelling. Until the last passage he renders all that has happened as if it were happening except that he repeats the past tenses of others' speech exactly as he heard their words. Sonny's reality is the story happening; if an adult says something happened and is over, he xeroxess the comment but in no way does he understand any of the divergences between present and past. Until the end. Then he himself moves among past, present, and future with a wonderful, confident
feel for the convergence and divergence between time and tenses, and between his home and the world beyond the family.

I hear the spring. I hear Mama and Daddy talking low, but I don’t know what they saying. I go to sleep some, but I open my eyes again. It’s some dark in the room. I hear Mama and Daddy talking low. I like Mama and Daddy. I like Uncle Al, but I don’t like old Gran’mon too much. Gran’mon’s always talking bad about Daddy. I don’t like old Mr. Freddie Jackson, either. Mama say she didn’t do her and Daddy’s thing with Mr. Freddie Jackson. I like Mr. George Williams. We went riding ‘way up the road with Mr. George Williams. We got Daddy’s car and brought it all the way back here. Daddy and them turned the car over and Daddy poured some gas on it and set it on fire. Daddy ain’t got no more car now. . . . I know my lesson. I ain’t go’n wee-wee on myself no more. Daddy’s going to school with me tomorrow. I’m go’n show him I can beat Billy Joe Martin shooting marbles. I can shoot all over Billy Joe Martin. And I can beat him running, too. He thinks he can run fast. I’m go’n show Daddy I can beat him running. . . . I don’t know why I had to say, “God bless Madame Toussaint.” I don’t like her. And I don’t like old Rollo, either. Rollo can bark some loud. He made my head hurt with all that loud barking. Madame Toussaint’s old house don’t smell good. Us house smell good. I hear the spring on Mama and Daddy’s bed. I get ‘way under the cover. I go to sleep little bit, but I wake up. I go to sleep some more. I hear the spring on Mama and Daddy’s bed. I hear it plenty now. It’s some dark under here. It’s warm. I feel good ‘way under here (pp. 78-79).

What a progression of voice and voice’s complexity, what burgeoning possibilities Sonny enacts in this passage. Now, like the men in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” Sonny has become an interpreter. The I is no longer passive, no longer merely an eye, no longer registering merely Sonny’s minimal physical condition of warmth or cold. Sensations remain crucial, remain the centers of existence without which Sonny would be lost, adrift. But now Sonny is home in the additional sense of “being at home in the world” within and without himself, with family and with other points of reference in the community. He distinguishes between the quality of sensations and recognizes the flow between sensation and situation. (“Madame Toussaint’s old house don’t smell good. Us house smell good”).

Warmth for Sonny begins with and now goes out from his physical being to moral relations, in this case the relations between his parents which are tested in sexual love. His warmth flows from the restoration
of their love, and his voice keys on the everyday things of his world. The spring on his parent’s bed is the revealing voice of their love. For Sonny voice demands absorption and integration of the sounds around him into a composition the likes of his last passage. And rhythm testifies to the quality of both voice and being. From the herky-jerky, complaining motion of Sonny’s voice at the beginning, there is a progression to full, confident, and continuous rhythms marking his passage, made through his efforts and others’, to a sense of well-being. Inside the covers he now hears and speaks more richly and interpretively than he did outside the covers when this long day began. To paraphrase Faulkner’s famous line from Light in August: hearing believes before speaking remembers. And everything is bound up with the resistable, irresistible force of change.

III

In “The Sky Is Gray” another boy uses his story to book passage on the ship of himself. Eight-year-old James goes with his mother beyond home and the quarters to Gaines’s imaginary town of Bayonne, a new and strange landscape for James, one dominated by white folks. As does Sonny in “A Long Day in November,” James tunes his voice by listening to the pitch of other voices. When he opens the story, his voice speaks almost too confidently about the way of the world. He knows when the bus will show up (he’s wrong, the bus is late as buses are), and he brags about how he’ll wave the big bus down with his little handkerchief. During the wait his mind drifts to the place of responsibility he as the oldest occupies while his father is in the army. At eight he’s a soldier about his toothache because he knows his mother is too poor to afford the dentist. Subtly, his memories mark his progress to this stoicism. In times past, his mother beat him because he refused to stab a little redbird to death with a fork. With her voice James’s aunt tried to intervene: “ ‘Octavia,’ Auntie say, ‘explain to him. Explain to him. Just don’t beat him. Explain to him’ ” (p. 90). But his mother is not about to temper action with words. James must (and does) figure things out for himself with a little help from other voices in the quarters.

But she hit me and hit me and hit me.
I’m still young—I ain’t no more eight; but I know now; I know why I had to do it. (They was so little, though. They was so little. I ’member how I picked the feathers off them and cleaned them and helt them over the fire. Then we all ate them. Ain’t had but a little bitty piece each, but we all had a little bitty piece, and
everybody just looked at me 'cause they was so proud.) Suppose she had to go away? That's why I had to do it. Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was go'n look after us? They had to be somebody left to carry on. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. Auntie and Monsieur Bayonne talked to me and made me see (p. 90).

This combination of action and words compels James to be articulate about the difficulties of his and his extended family's life, and makes him know his place in the lineage of kinship and continuity.

Back in the present the scene shifts to the harsh, dangerous landscape of the town. Any testing James undergoes will be on alien ground without the explicit allegiance he could count on in his initiations at the quarters. The town is an unfamiliar world; instead of the American flag James knows from his school, the courthouse flies the Confederate stars and bars. Seeing is confusion, so his mother tells him to “keep my eyes in front where they belong.” Reminiscent of the folk tale “Sister Goose,” these playgrounds are for white children, these cafes for white folks, shoes in shoe store windows apparently the same. His mother's voice is the reliable guide.

James chafes at the leash his mother's put on him. In the dentist's office—the lesser, cheaper one is where black folks go—James encounters a young Negro man who challenges the views of race and reality held by both whites and blacks. Behind James, Gaines's stance toward the radical skepticism of this young man seems comically equivocal. James, though, sees him as a model. And it is the young man's voice, even more than his clothes and book, that captivates James. Anyone who can sit in a waiting room among the folks and especially among several true-believing sisters and say out loud “the wind is pink” and “the grass is black” has to have something. James, after all, is beginning to look for his own way; his father has been drafted away from him for reasons unclear to him and unaccepted by his mother and aunt. And here is this young man taking his own way and making that way through originality of talk, through voice and style.

Still, even this shabby waiting room is something of a sanctuary as James discovers when the dentist's office shuts down for lunch before his turn. Now, he makes a passage with his mother across the town's color line. On the walk neither intrudes on the other's private space. As men notice and whistle at his mother, James does not embarrass her with questions. Likewise, she understands that her son has reached his tolerance level for the cold; she too knows the bond between them depends on not speaking of certain things. Consequently, she puts on a performance in a hardware store long enough for James to get warm at the heater. "Got any axe handles?" she asks the man, and James on-
ly begins to hear and see what is happening. "Look like she's trying to say something to me, but I don't know what it is. All I know is I done got warm now and I'm feeling right smart better" (p. 105). He does not blunder in but reads the signs well enough to know the best response is silence.

Outside, other forces of pain and opposition gather. Sleet falls in needles from the gray sky suggesting that nature offers no consolation in this time and place. James learns that he must count on himself, that as his mother spends half of her salt meat money to buy him a few cakes, his allegiance and love for her must be expressed through restraint heard in the understatement of his voice. In a ritual of performance, starving, he tells the lie that he's not hungry because he knows that's the only way she'll accept one of the cakes. Next he watches her dance with and then slam a pimp against the wall and threaten him with her knife. Wisely, he says and does nothing to distract her. Once more she can count on her son to read (and hear) the signs of their condition. Throughout, this short walk through a small town has the quality of an odyssey through the elementals of human experience. Gaines realizes a timelessness and universality because of the casual, trivial, and stubbornly particular details of James's experience in this town of Bayonne.

He faces the pains of cold, hunger, and head-splitting toothache; he faces too what could become a life and death situation for his mother. All this tests his ability not only to see and hear but to perform as himself.

The surest, subtlest test comes last. As James and his mother head back toward the dentist's office, a little, old, brittle but spritely, white lady accosts them. She's a figure for the kind, churchly, perhaps too kind white folks ready to do good turns for Negroes amidst the many traps of Jim Crow Southern towns. So, how is James to respond, hungry, cold, tired, and still in pain, as he is at this point? With dignity and equality his mother teaches him. She'll eat the food only if she can keep her sense of herself as an equal, and this means that she and the kind old white woman set the terms of the situation together. Consequently, James takes a couple of garbage cans around to the street in front of the store. He discovers it's a set-up, that the cans are empty, but he carries through with his act, and inside watches his mother orchestrate a more complex performance, one part ritualized and another part improvised. His mother turns down the extra salt meat the woman gives her for her quarter. Then the two women, black and white, elaborately split the difference, the facts of the situation never explicit, always implicit. Finally, James's mother upholds both the woman's generosity and her own dignity with a simple, direct ritual statement:

"Your kindness will never be forgotten," she says. "James," she says to me (p. 117).
Lest James think his ordeal of testing is over, his mother in two terse eloquent lines, reminds him that nothing in life is easy:

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" (p. 117).

Now hearing is indeed believing. In a turn of voice and tense, she makes the story's dominant chord a simple statement of fact. Her voice is not conditional. James is a man because he has come to act that way during the course of the day's journey. Hearing her voice gives him the realization of his own. And he has learned well that sometimes the appropriate response is silence. In this case he ends his story shrewdly leaving his mother's voice to reverberate the truth of himself. He has spoken and acted truly. He has told her words truly, and he has no need to swagger with step or voice. This last restraint of performance as he ends his story confirms that he has come a long way on the passage from boy to man. Being true to other reliable voices signifies the authentic possibilities of his own developing voice.

IV

The first two stories in Bloodline initiate the storytellers into the voices of family and the quarters and into those of the Jim Crow town beyond. In "Three Men" the voices come from the belly of the beast as the landscape contracts to the county jail. Like Sonny in "A Long Day in November" and James in "The Sky Is Gray," Nineteen-year-old Procter Lewis shapes both his stance toward experience and his voice out of exposure to a gamut of voices. Procter has been in jail before, but he's never killed anyone and so has never had to confront the power of "the scheme of things." Much more than in "The Sky Is Gray," race emerges at once as a constant and variable factor of enormous importance. To survive, a black man needs to make sophisticated and sometimes rapid calculations about race in the equations of particular situations. And ear and voice are weapons of self-defense.

After he turns himself in, Procter hears the voices of two white cops. T. J., the man in charge, ups the ante to a call for genocide. "'See, if I was gov'nor, I'd run every durned one of you off in that river out there. Man, woman, and child. You know that?'" (p. 125). Even worse, T. J. demands Procter Lewis respond to his diatribe and respond properly. By now Procter is up and poised on the balls of his feet: "'That's up to the gov'nor, sir,' I said" (p. 125). And he avoids a beating for
the time being. Gaines, though, lives in complexities, and so he counter-
points T. J.'s 45 magnum voice with another voice, belonging to Paul, 
the other cop. Even before he's said much, Paul reminds Procter of a 
guy who "used to show up just about every Sunday to play baseball 
with us—the only white boy out there" (p.126). Back in the present, 
Paul takes Procter to a cell, gives him a pack of cigarettes, and, in the 
tones of his simple advice, utters a modest allegiance. "Don't push 
T. J. Don't push him, now'" (p. 128). But T. J. deals the cards, and 
his voice reverberates the brutal sounds of fists and boots smashing 
up flesh and bones. T. J. does nothing, not yet, but his voice makes 
us believe in the utmost difficulty of what Procter Lewis later decides 
to do.

Another voice, the dominant voice of "Three Men" (except for the 
storyteller Procter's), the black voice of Munford Bazille initiates Pro-
crer into his choices. Munford's experienced voice embodies power in 
guises different from those implied by the tones of T. J.'s voice. It takes 
Procter a while to catch the drift of Munford's voice and his stance 
toward this world. At first, put into a cell with Munford and Hattie, 
a black man picked up for homosexual behavior in a theater, Procter 
responds with a careful double-consciousness. He knows it would be 
dangerous to show any cracks in his savvy facade, so he holds in his 
vulnerability and answers Munford's terse questions simply and 
straightforwardly. Already, he's learning that life's situations require 
habitual sizing-up. "I felt lonely and I felt like crying," he says to himself. 
"But I couldn't cry. Once you started that in here you was done for" 
(p.127). His sense of the immediate situation is right, but at this point 
he has no inkling of the part T. J. and the big boys behind him who 
"run little towns like these" intend for him in the scheme of things.

It falls to Munford, who, now sixty, has fought and killed other 
Negroes, been jailed and bailed out by powerful white men for over 
fourty years, to explain "the scheme of things" to Procter Lewis. T. J., 
enforcer of white supremacy's code, intends this to happen. He's put 
Procter in with Munford exactly because he wants the younger man 
broken in by one of his own kind. He counts on Munford, who is bit-
ter and cynical, to explain things, to tell Procter that as long as he turns 
himself over to Rodger Medlow—one of the "big men that run little 
towns like these" (p. 136)—he'll have a privileged, immune, perennial 
role in performances of the kill a nigger on Saturday night entertain-
ment. (I should point out here that Procter has not yet murdered 
anyone; the man he's killed he killed in self-defense. Bayou runs into 
Procter's broken bottle after Procter repeatedly pleads with him to put 
away his knife and stop their fight. What Procter is supposed to learn 
from Munford is that facts are beside the point. What counts is not 
justice but the power of white men). But Munford turns T. J.'s plan
inside out. In a reversal of form, he tells Procter to break the pattern. He tells him the hustle exists so whites can affirm their non-existent manhood by seeing to it that Negroes "ain't men." He tells Procter he can crack the "scheme of things" by taking beatings from T. J., going to Angola, the state pen, taking more beatings there, serving his time and coming out after five years a free man unbehelden to Medlow or anyone else. Or, Munford tells him, you can forfeit your manhood by having Medlow get you out now.

Wily dealer that he is, Munford plays a last card to turn Procter away from the easy way out.

"But I'll tell you this; if you was kin to anybody else except that Martin Baptiste, I'd stay in here long enough to make you go to Angola. Cause I'd break your back 'fore I let you walk out of this cell with Medlow. But with Martin Baptiste blood in you, you'll never be worth a goddamn no matter what I did. With that, I bid you adieu" (p. 142).

If you were who you're not, Munford tells Procter, I'd make you a better man than I. And he leaves playing out the pattern of the past one more time. Earlier Munford told Procter that "they grow niggers just to be killed, and they grow people like you to kill 'em" (p. 142). Munford modulates into a worldly and truculent voice, a voice arrogant and seemingly able to calculate the odds against any surprises. And through this strategy of voice Munford hopes to stoke Procter's anger hot enough for the younger man to decide to pay the awful but really bargain price for a measure of freedom and dignity. T. J.'s is a mean voice, nothing beneath its tones but hate and ultimately self-loathing; Munford's voice, mean too, contains grains of bitter love.

Munford's ploy works, for it is only after he leaves flouting his acquiescence to "the scheme of things" he understands and despises that Procter begins to compose a stance toward experience. As Munford intended him to, he spots the contradiction between that man's advice and his course of action. "Don't tell me to do it when he didn't do it," he answers his inner voice of manhood. "If that's part of the culture, then I'm part of the culture, because I sure ain't for the pen" (p. 144). But that voice has too much of the hollow swagger Procter sees through in Munford's performance; soon the echo of Munford's voice works as an agent of change. Procter begins to see himself as an animal in prison and in his life outside. He respects no one, not his uncle—"that asshole uncle of mine"—, not his lover, Marie—"treating her like a dog, anyhow" (p. 144) —not himself. He confronts the worst possibility ("Maybe I'm an animal already.") and repudiates it as a categorical imperative of self. And a new force enters his voice. "Hell, let me stop
whining; I ain't no goddamn animal. I'm a man, and I got to act and think like a man" (p. 144). Voice is the bridge between action and thought. As he works out his version of the Cartesian Discourse, existence as a human being, and an individual, depends on manhood. *I'm a man, therefore I am.*

The meditation changes direction as Procter looks for a way out, some ingenious possibility whereby he can be a man and be outside the state pen. But Hattie's false, siren voice interrupts the dispute between Procter's inner voices. "Oh, you're so beautiful when you're meditating" (p. 145). Procter answers Hattie's blandishments with silence and goes back and forth in his mind until Uncle Toby's arrival with dinner triggers a case known to Procter of a man he knew who was broken by this peculiar form of bail-out. For the first time in the story Procter's voice begins to move with the fluidity of life's possibilities, good and bad, positive and negative, known and unknown.

Look at the way they did Jack. Jack was a man, a good man. Look what they did him. Let a fifteen-cents Cajun bond him out of jail—a no-teeth, dirty, overall-wearing Cajun get him out. Then they broke him. Broke him down to nothing—to a grinning, bowing fool. . . . We loved Jack. Jack could do anything. Work, play ball, run women—anything. They knewed we loved him, that's why they did him that. Broke him—broke him the way you break a wild horse. . . . Now everybody laughs at him. Gamble with him and cheat him. He know you cheating him, but he don't care—just don't care any more. . . (p. 147).

In this scheme of things a good man can still be broken if he goes for the bail-out. Here, the way to manhood is to take your punishment, the unjust sentence, the time in the state pen. Etheridge Knight's "Hard Rock Returns to Prison From the Hospital For The Criminal Insane" tells of a man broken in the joint, and the effect hoped for by the authorities is to take away the last hope of the other, unbroken prisoners.

And even after we discovered that it tood Hard Rock
Exactly 3 minutes to tell you his first name,
We told ourselves that he had just wised up,
Was being cool; but we could not fool ourselves for long,
And we turned away, our eyes on the ground. Crushed.
He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things
We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,
*The fears of years, like a biting whip,*
*Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.*17 (My italics)
Break a community's heroic individual and you may break that community's will to resistance.

Procter react by going to the one well left open to him: himself. “I got nothing in this world but me,” he tells himself. So voice strips down to essentials and once more becomes an interior force preparing Procter to act in the world. Even as an unspoken, interior reality, voice stands for the potential of action. Like Munford, Procter becomes an agent of personal and social change, in his case for a fourteen-year-old boy brought in for stealing, and beaten—obviously the Negro male next in line for breaking into the scheme of things.

First, in order to be that agent and actor, Procter must compose a voice of his own. Again, hearing is believing. All this happens in a beautifully orchestrated incident, one trivial in appearance but in reality charged with importance. Watching the stars come out, Procter shuts his eyes for a while then opens them to try to find again the first star of the evening. Naturally, he has trouble, but finally, tellingly, definitely, he resists the temptation to kid himself. “I could’ve pretended and chose either one, but I didn’t want lie to myself. I don’t believe in lying to nobody else, either,“ he says and goes on to qualify his position. “I believe in straight stuff. But a man got to protect himself” (p. 148). Here, ellipses indicate a pause or is it a break in the continuity of Procter’s developing voice and values? His next words resolve his (and our) doubts. “But with stars I wasn’t go’n cheat. If I didn’t know where the one was I was looking at at first, I wasn’t go’n say I did” (p. 148). Intellectually free and methodologically open, he applies himself to the problem of perspective and finds the star. He goes from there to a starkly honest perspective about his feelings: he “ain’t never loved nobody since my mama died. Because I loved her, I know I loved her. But the rest—no, I never loved the rest” (p. 149).

The struggle for autonomy continues as Procter tells himself “I would be good if I knewed a good person” (p. 149). Circumstances intervene. A fourteen-year-old boy, “crying too much to answer” Procter’s questions, is tossed into the cell by a couple of guards. Briefly, Procter plays Dutch uncle—“ You got no business stealing’ ” (p. 150)—but withdraws when Hattie rocks the boy in his arms and calls Procter a “ ‘merciless killer.’ ” At this point Procter retreats to the rhythms behind his voice. “I walked, I walked, I walked,” he says, and I can hear him pacing his cell. Wildly, he considers shouting out a call for insurrection to the sleeping prisoners. The stars again, the remote “million, little white, cool stars” move him back to reality; there follows a painful prelude to his return to speech. “I didn’t make a sound, but I cried. I cried and cried and cried” (p. 151). Procter holds inside both his fury and his grief at the condition of things. Before speaking, he articulates his resolve in an inner voice convincing because of its rendition of Procter’s motion,
rhythm, and style. "I knowed I was going to the pen now. I knowed I was going, I knowed I was going" (p. 152). In this way Procter earns the authority he needs to deal with the boy. If he had failed of his own passage to manhood, then he would not convince himself of anything he told the boy. His would be a false voice as fatally self-serving as Hattie's sexually seductive voice.

In Gaines's fiction manhood needs to be both an idea and a practice, and in the end an act of kinship. So it is that in "Three Men" this young boy compels Procter to be true or false to himself as a man. Procter lays out the responsibilities of kinship to the boy. "'That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings—with you praying'" (p. 153). Praying is a sign of an innocence and openness to belief that Procter has lost but wishes to preserve in the boy. "Deep in me I felt some kind of love for this little boy" (p. 153). This follows from Procter's awareness that he hasn't been able to feel love for anyone since his mother died. In this context love, he tells the boy, will give him the power to endure the beatings he knows are coming from T. J. as soon as he makes known his intention to go to the state pen. Such is Procter's voice to the boy. It has come from his most intimate private experience, and in some sense it is also a public voice calculated to imbue the boy with lasting values like faith and courage.

Still, Gaines and now Procter are too scrupulous to leave an impression of unambiguous change. Of the men in "Three Men," Procter stands behind the eight ball, and at the end questions himself: "Was I going to be able to take it?" Who knows, before the test of the event? Not Procter, not Gaines, and not the reader either. "I don't know, I thought to myself. I'll just have wait and see" (p. 155). Once more, hearing is believing, and Procter's interior voice speaks with quiet tautness, with what Keats, facing changes in his life, called "negative capability"—"when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysterie, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." 18 In Procter's voice are tones of willingness to accept the necessity of waiting on himself as well as the world. His refusal to make predictions—only promises—conveys that he can hear if not yet see changes coming in the scheme of things.

V

In the title story, "Bloodline," the storyteller is seventy-year-old Felix whose voice is of the old school. He's lived his life under the old order; until now he's never entered the library in the Laurent house. What's more, Felix apologizes to no one for his complex stance toward the scheme of things. He's not had a shot at changing the rules, though
it's clear he's glad of the approaching shifts of power, provided the new
generation of Negroes respects its kinship ties to the old folks. Neither
will Felix give any ground to stereotyped ideas about his relations with
plantation owner, Frank Laurent. "I obeyed his orders because I
respected him; not because I was scared of him" (p. 166). Felix reminds
me of Alice Walker's character, Meridian's "memory of old black men
in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of a camera, never
shifted their position but looked directly back." 19 His voice flows
slowly in measures of dignity that cannot be conferred or taken away.
He is the first storyteller in Bloodline whose own story is not the cen-
tral action. His voice tells history and makes history not by making
the action but by composing a spoken and written record of the ac-
tions of his world. Close to natural forces and cycles in his life, Felix
senses social forces moving almost like the forces of nature. He hollows
his voice out of the valley of his experience the way glaciers melted
and over the ages changed the form of the landscape.

In "Bloodline" the apparent issue is Frank Laurent's inheritance. Will
the heir be Frank's niece who, indifferent to the land, will sell the plant-
tation to Cajuns who will subdivide it, or Frank's half-white, half-black
nephew, Copper who, loving the land, will try to run it according to
a new order of racial equality, with himself as master? Palpably, the
issue is the nature of changes coming at this particular turn of history.
As a participant as well as the storyteller, Felix is a mediator. He or-
chestrates the opposing voices of Frank and Copper into one intricate
composition. This imposes difficulties on the story, for Frank Laurent's
voice embodies and upholds the static past: "I didn't write the
rules. . . . And I won't try to change them' " (p. 187). Later, in con-
frontation with Copper he says: "I did not write these rules and the
laws you've been talking about; I came here and found them just as
you did. And neither one of us is going to change them, not singly' "
(p. 216).

Copper, the militant voice of another generation, speaks with the
tones of a firebrand; he also, Felix stresses, inherits a love of power
and authority from his father, Walter Laurent. At any rate, Copper
uses voice to perform the rhetoric of command. When J. W., one of
the toughs Frank dispatches to the quarters to fetch Copper up to the
back door of the big house, returns whipped up, he reports as follows:
"'Yes sir, he told me to tell you. When a general ain't got no more
army, ain't but one thing for him to do' " (p. 198). Face to face, voice
to voice with Frank, when Frank has come down to the quarters late
in the story, Copper revs the voice of war. "'Get me some water, '"
he commands Felix "like he was speaking to a slave" (p. 204). And of
the retainers Frank has unsuccessfully sent after him, Copper declares
contemptuously: "'When they act like men, I'll treat them like men.
When they let you make them act like animals, then I'll treat them like animals" (p. 208).

In Gaines's fiction recognition and acceptance of kinship precede changes in the larger social scheme of things. During the conversation and confrontation between Copper and Frank Laurent such recognition changes their relations. For a long time they spar with voices for gloves. Toward the end Copper turns Frank around. He does it not through political or moral appeals to justice—he makes such appeals, but Frank calls him "as insane as anyone has ever been. To think you can carry the burden of this world on your shoulders is not an original idea" (p. 215). No, what works is Copper's appeal to bloodline. Angry that Frank tells him to "'shut up when I'm talking,' Copper stands over Frank and reminds him of his bloodline. "'I'm a Laurent, Uncle, and you better remember it.'" Frank's voice shows that Copper has hit target. "'My apologies—Nephew,' Frank said. 'Now, shall I go on?'" (p. 215). Apparently, some things do come down to blood kinship, for Gaines the substratum of Southern history.

From this point the two men, uncle and nephew exchange views less polemically than before. Copper says he will leave now and when he comes back in the future he will truly take his birthright, the plantation, by blood if necessary. And Frank Laurent refuses Copper Laurent's offer of help back to the car. "'I have Felix there,' Frank said, without looking at him" (p. 217). In fact, both have Felix, although in his contempt and impatience Copper may not understand what a slow and effective catalyst Felix has been throughout. The older man consistently has refused to undermine Copper to Frank. In his role as Frank's tacit adviser Felix objects only to Copper's "hurting his aunt like he's doing" (p. 201). On several occasions Felix's economy of voice and gesture sends Frank the message that times are changing—and people too. At one point Felix reminds Frank that the only sure way to drive off Copper would be to flash the word to the Cajuns that he's fair game. "We ain't had a good lynching in a long time; they probably wouldn't mind going themself to get him" (p. 198). For Frank, as Felix well knows, that's losing too, so indeed in his own way Felix works for Copper, if not for every one of his ends. He knows and moves Frank toward knowing that when their generation goes, this world will belong to the Coppers—with more than a little justice.

Appropriately, at the story's end, Felix disappears as a character and devotes himself to the task of history. He records the change in the scheme of things signalled by the story's events. At the end he focuses on Copper whose last words to Frank are a message to his aunt Malia, and we know Frank will deliver it because it's for him too. There will come a day in her time, says Copper, when "'I'll come back. And tell her when I do, she'll never have to go through your back door ever
again' " (p. 217). This is an old prophecy among Afro-Americans. In the '20's Sterling Brown wrote these lines in his poem, "Sister Lou":

Honey
Don't be feared of them pearly gates,
Don't go 'round to de back,
No mo 'dataway
Not evah no mo.  

Felix's last narrative words describe Copper without the irony previously and justifiably in his voice. "He bowed and went inside—walking fast the way soldiers walk" (p. 217). What's been happening has been in some sense a re-enactment of the Civil War—blood against blood—with the twin questions of union and equality somehow at the heart of the struggle. As in so much of Gaines's fiction, the possibility of change exists because whatever the horrors and injustices of Southern history, the essential connections between people of both races have been maintained through kinships of blood and experience. The bloodlines themselves are mixed and in flux and carry with them a common destiny—whether fortunate or not is impossible to tell, but that destiny somehow will be worked out in common. And Felix's careful, complex, humorous, stubborn, slow survivor's voice speaks from the core of possibility. His voice includes the tones of everyone in his life. Because of his complex allegiances, he's been able to create a voice respected by almost everyone. Even though Copper affects to despise Felix as a mere functionary of the Laurens, his plans and hopes depend upon Felix's ability to make Copper's case in the voice of his story. For his part, Felix's stoic confidence and sense of the truth allow him to mark both Frank and Copper Laurent as kin, not by birth or blood, but by listening and talking, by the unofficial experience of history and tradition of voices.

VI

"Just Like A Tree," the second story in Bloodline to be written by Gaines, fittingly becomes the last story told in the collection. Gaines tells the story in a sequence of different voices; each one moves the story forward in time. The idea behind this form Gaines gets from Moussoursky's Pictures At an Exhibition as well as from memories of the way stories were often told in the rural Louisiana of his childhood.  
He composes a world through portraits provided by many voices and points of view, and each somehow moves the story forward. It is fitting too that this last story in the collection should derive its title and theme from the old Negro spiritual. The old woman in the
story is “just like a tree that’s planted ‘side the water”; she “shall not be moved.” Neither will Gaines be moved from his kinship with this landscape. The story tests roots and the kinship between a human being and her place as well as between her and her people. At the heart of this and the other stories in Bloodline lies a determination to stand and fight on the ground of one’s roots. And this choice is acted out in the voice of Gaines the writer as well as in the spoken voices of his storytelling characters.

In “Just Like A Tree” children, adults, old people, men and women, black and even a white woman, Southern and even James, an irreverent, somewhat callous Northern Negro: all kinds of folks, ten voices strong, lend their different voices and perspectives to the composition that is the story. They’ve come together for a sad, apparently necessary occasion: the uprooting of old, old, old Aunt Fe from her cabin in the quarters. Again, personal change is triggered by cracks in the social order. At last, civil rights actions have come to the neighborhood. In retaliation there is a bombing that kills a Negro woman and her two children, and so Aunt Fe’s family and friends gather to say good-bye before they remove her from this place of her life.

The dominant voices belong to Aunt Clo and Aunt Lou, two old women whose lives and voices express kinship with Aunt Fe. Aunt Clo’s section is the story’s center, though she never even mentions Aunt Fe. Instead, she speaks in a metaphor so extended it becomes a parable for the immediate situation and for man’s overall relation to living things. Aunt Clo’s tale takes flight from the old spiritual of the story’s title. Her voice reverberates the ages: weatherbeaten, unvictorious, undefeated, abiding. The very idea of moving Aunt Fe is wrong, false, preposterous— as if, Clo thinks, you could move a tree from rural Louisiana to the streets of Chicago, Detroit, or Cleveland. In the end Aunt Clo knows the mover’s best intentions could dissipate with a shrug: “if she keep getting in the way. I guess we’ll just have to take her to the dump” (p.237).

These very abiding and stoical voices of the old folks act also as agents of change. Indeed, in her last hours, Aunt Fe fuels a younger voice toward acts of change. From Etienne we hear of Emmanuel, a young civil rights leader, blamed by some of the people for the trouble behind the apparent uprooting of Aunt Fe. Etienne records Emmanuel’s call on Aunt Fe so that her role in his identity and his work of social change becomes plain to everyone.

“I’m going to miss you, Aunt Fe, 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?”

She looks in the fire and nods.

“Remember how they lynched him—chopped him into pieces?”
She nods.

"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 get killing out of my mind. It was you who told me I would only bring harm to myself and sadness to the others if I killed. Do you remember that, Aunt Fe?"

She nods, still looking in the fire.

"You were right. We cannot raise our arms. Because it would mean death for ourselves, as well as for the others. But we will do something else—and that's what we will do." He looks at the people standing round him. "And if they were to bomb my own mother's house tomorrow, I would still go on" (pp.246-7).

Aunt Fe has given Emmanuel the needful, painful gift of his history, and, knowingly, cannily, craftily, she has modulated his fury for revenge into an effective political stance, one so effective she now appears one of its casualties. In some sense she has been his general, and so at the end she blesses him saying "God be with you." For all to hear she acknowledges his lineage of kinship and her commitment to his work; his way has flowed from her rooted stoicism, her openness to change. Fe has kept faith in this her place.

In the last section, told by Aunt Lou, Aunt Fe dies seeming to choose death at this moment still hearing the voices of departing kin and friends rather than stave it off till she's far from this, her place. Her last repeated word (" 'Lou?' she say. 'Lou?' ") questions things around her. Is Aunt Lou there? Is she there herself? How will she make the difficult passage from life into the unknown country of death? She struggles and in Aunt Lou’s kindred voice is heard the old, old woman’s courage as she takes her long, last waking breath. The last words belong to Aunt Lou, and she seems to speak of the old Negro order passing away.

"Sleep on, Fe," I tell her. "When you get up there, tell 'em I ain't far behind" (p. 247).

Den take yo' time... Honey, take yo' bressed time.22

The lineage of these women continues in this place to enact changes they’ve made possible through the action of their lives and voices. In Gaines’s fiction this generation of Negro women and men prepares the way for the changes in the scheme of things that were partly achieved in the Civil Rights actions of the '50's and '60's. Of course, the struggle goes on inside and outside fiction. Aunt Fe and the others never stopped telling the truth, never stopped giving the blessings of voice to soldiers in succeeding generations. Through all the static days of defeat, the
power of voice kept self articulate and confirmed the people's connections with each other and the world beyond. For Gaines the complex, crossing lines of voice are instances of kinship and of bloodline itself; certainly, lines of blood—the calculable, incalculable mixing, the heartbeats—are heard everywhere in the voices of his stories. “I am telling you this,” wrote the poet Michael Harper: “history is your own heartbeat.”23 In Bloodline Gaines looks to voice to bridge the distance between realities of heart and history. Not least, though Gaines turns these stories and their telling over to the characters, is Gaines's voice in all this. There is no line between his voice and the voices of his people, his characters. He's heard them all and, writing, hears them still, still talking and living lives and stories that make change believable and possible.

VII

When all is said and done and told, idiom becomes voice, and place opens up into landscape in the stories of Bloodline. These changes flow out of Gaines's tissues and the very grain of his landscape and its people. Elsewhere, Gaines has enacted the melding of landscape into voice and voice back into landscape. Tucked away in his memoir, “Miss Jane and I,” is a sudden stunning confession of craft—Gaines's unembarrassed, passionate declaration of love for the Louisiana of his experience.

I wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks, search for pecans in that Louisiana grass in one of those Louisiana yards next to one of those Louisiana bayous, not far from a Louisiana river. I wanted to see on paper those Louisiana black children walking to school on cold days while yellow Louisiana busses passed them by. I wanted to see on paper those black parents going to work before the sun came up and coming back home to look after their children after the sun went down. I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home—not because they were trifling or shiftless—but because they were tired of putting up with certain conditions. I wanted to see on paper the small country churches (schools during the week), and I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers—that true devotion. (It was Faulkner, I think, who said that if God were to stay alive in the country, the blacks would have to keep Him so.) And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black. For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere—unless, of course, you take exceptional pride in "proper" French or "proper" English.
I wanted to read about the true relationship between whites and blacks—about the people that I had known.24

Here, Gaines evokes both his Louisiana and his writer's way of turning that place into the complex world of his fiction. Notice the sensuous apprehension of place that precedes Gaines's repeated assertion of the particular social phenomenon he "wanted to see on paper" from that moral landscape. "Smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun": his intensive that's and those make palpable the irreducible qualities of place. As Gaines makes manifest the contingent and alterable society that's come to exist alongside the reality of abiding Nature, place becomes landscape on paper before our eyes. But the instrument behind that passage of the spoken word from memory to the territory of the page is the instrument of the writer's human voice. "For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere," Gaines says about "that Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black." And that combination is there in Bloodline to reverberate nuances of personality and human possibility long after all is said and told. In these stories Gaines has done nothing less than create a landscape whose changes begin and end with the changes of voice.

Notes

3 In addition to Bloodline, I have in mind here Of Love and Dust and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines novels narrated by Jim Kelly and Jane Pittman respectively, people who are both characters and storytellers. Likewise, one of the strengths of Gaines's eloquent new novel, A Gathering of Old Men (1983), lies in the different voices of its several narrators, white and black, male and female, young and old: Louisianans all.
7 Ibid.
10 Callaloo, p. 42.
11 Callaloo, p. 39.
12 Shadow and Act, pp. 105-6.
13 Bloodline (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 3. Henceforth, quotations from Bloodline will be cited in the text as B.
16In his interview with Charles H. Rowell (Callaloo, May, 1978), Gaines identifies several sources that blended into the central situation of “Three Men.” “One day,” he told Rowell, “I was sitting around listening to a record by Lightnin’ Hopkins, and these words stuck in my mind: ‘The worse thing this black man ever done—when he moved his wife and family to Mr. Tim Moore’s farm. Mr. Tim Moore’s man don’t stand and grin; say ‘If you stay out the graveyard nigger, I’ll keep you out the pen.’’ These words haunted me for weeks, for months—without my knowing why, or what I would ever do with them.” Gaines then recalled coming back to Louisiana in 1965, “and a friend of mine and I were talking, and during our conversation he told me that another friend of ours had been killed by another black man in Baton Rouge, and that the person who had killed him was sent to prison for only a short time and then released. When I heard this, I had no idea that this incident could have any connection with the Lightnin’ Hopkins blues verse. But the two things—the murder and the song—stayed in my mind so much that I began to wonder what I could do with them. Then I recalled hearing about two other incidents in which blacks had murdered blacks. In Case One, when a white lawyer offered his services for a small fee, the prisoner told him that he would rather go to the pen and pay for his crime. But in Case Two the prisoner left with his white employer. Remembering the first incident, I wrote the long story, ‘Three Men.’”

All of what Gaines hears from the rural blues he calls “my choice in music” and from old friends and acquaintances he absorbs and changes into the several voices of “Three Men.”
21In an unpublished interview I did with Ernest Gaines in 1974, he spoke of the influence of Moussoursky’s composition on his approach to form and voice in “Just Like a Tree” and early versions of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. “I used to listen to this (Pictures At an Exhibition) daily, and daily and daily.” For Gaines’s comments on “Just Like a Tree,” see “Miss Jane and I,” Callaloo (May, 1978), pp. 34-5.
23Images of Kin, p. 147.
24Callaloo, p. 28.