The Pulse of *Bloodline*

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While often treated as a miscellaneous collection of stories, Ernest J. Gaines's *Bloodline* can be more fully appreciated when analyzed as a short story sequence: a volume of short fiction in which various unities and modes of coherence meld autonomous stories into a work whose whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts as readers sequentially process and organize its components. This genre's roots may be traced back to Chaucer and Boccaccio—before the short story was a formally defined genre—yet many of the form's early manifestations as well as its two seminal works, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*, attempt to provide a composite picture of a locale that might not be possible within the spatial confines of the plot of a novel. Using setting rather than plot or character as the central element, regional-based collections such as *Bloodline* exhibit a remarkable unity, one in which the locale transcends the role of background and ultimately exerts ideological and aesthetic control over the work's contents.

Place—which Eudora Welty calls the "lesser angel" (116) of the novel—can supplant the more traditional causal and temporal narrative spine of the novel to provide short story sequences with an alternative mode of equilibrium and sense of direction. Even without incorporating other devices to lend coherence, regional writers with strong feelings for the shaping effect of environment can create volumes whose stories seem cut of the same cloth rather than merely patched together. Although the stories in such collections may vary in focus and emphasis, they work together to map out a region's physical and emotional geography. An author may also organize a short story sequence by recurrent
themes, a common narrator or characters, reiterated character types, or repeated symbols and motifs, but it is the unity of setting that provides the collection with a literal common ground that these other spatial modes of textual organization may easily complement. Technical and structural devices (such as titles, headnotes, maps, frames, section division, juxtaposition, or a loose temporal framework) can also lend regional-based volumes a greater degree of formal wholeness. Hamlin Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads*, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* exemplify the piecemeal fashion in which late-nineteenth-century writers in the American local color tradition constructed unified pictures of particular locales. Such works illustrated formal possibilities later emulated and augmented by twentieth-century short story writers such as Anderson, Toomer, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Welty, Updike, and Gaines. Contemporary writers are adopting the form with greater frequency, often to illustrate the fragmentation or multiplicity of a region or community, although at the same time the result may affirm connections that transcend the sense of separateness promoted by the volume’s division into stories.

*Bloodline*’s place in this generic tradition has yet to be recognized fully. It clearly stands in a direct line of descent from the form’s paradigmatic representatives, Anderson’s *Winesburg* and Joyce’s *Dubliners*, both of which Gaines has professed intimate acquaintance with (Rowell, “This Louisiana Thing” 44), although he does not acknowledge either as a formal model. *Bloodline* resembles Joyce’s work more than Anderson’s, as it lacks the consistent, sometimes intrusive narrative voice and the central protagonist who figures so strongly in complementing *Winesburg*’s village setting. In *Bloodline*’s emphasis on the paralytic effect of environment and the creation of a composite regional figure out of different protagonists, it bears a strong resemblance to *Dubliners* in both theme and structure: the progression of Joyce’s characters from youth to adolescence and then to mature life and finally public life loosely reflects the shifting male characters in *Bloodline* as they move from youth in the quarters into the struggle for civil rights.

A number of works by writers from different traditions might be seen as forerunners to *Bloodline*. As a student at San Francisco State, Gaines began to “read about anybody who would write about the earth” (Laney 5). Among those writers who published short story sequences, Turgenev and Steinbeck head the list, although Gaines was more interested in the
mieux than in the form of their works. Nonetheless, Turgenev's intimate depiction of rural peasant life in *A Sportsman's Sketches*, which Gaines has praised for its clarity and beauty, offers a composite regional portrait made up of numerous smaller works. Gaines does not mention any particular works by Steinbeck, but in *The Pastures of Heaven*, *Tortilla Flat*, and even *The Red Pony*, a number of autonomous tales are unified into a sequential narrative occurring in the same locale. Gaines was also an avid reader of Hemingway, whose "writings of that grace under pressure... made me see my own black people" (Rowell, "This Louisiana Thing" 44) and whose *In Our Time* employs a complex alternating structure of stories and vignettes to sketch the evolution of a central protagonist whose experiences are counterpointed by those of other characters. Finally, Gaines has acknowledged that, among Southern writers, Faulkner's influence is strongest, yet he has taken pains to emphasize that the debt is predominantly in style rather than philosophy. Still, in expressing his fondness for the structure of *Bloodline*, he has compared the result of "getting all these [stories] together to make a novel" with Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (Gaudet and Wooton 34).

While Gaines primarily studied white writers in college, he has singled out Jean Toomer's *Cane* (which he read around 1960—after he had begun writing *Bloodline*’s first stories) as "one book by a black writer that would have had as much influence on me as any other book" in both subject and structure. "What he does in those short chapters are things that I wish I could do today, those little short chapters, those little songs, the poetry between the chapters" (Gaudet and Wooton 34). Although *Bloodline* consists of much longer stories and has a more deliberate movement from beginning to end, *Cane*’s first two sections—one focused on rural Georgia women and the other on urban blacks—offer a model of thematic development through regional-based portraits. In addition, the long concluding story, "Kabnis," creates a coda-like structure that stresses the value of the rural community’s roots in much the same way that "Just Like a Tree" does in *Bloodline*.

Gaines’s admiration of *Cane*, with its variations on themes structured in a fashion emulating jazz, suggests that non-literary sources from the African-American tradition should not be ignored in the list of potential influences on *Bloodline*’s form. From listening to jazz (and reading Hemingway), Gaines has noted, he learned the virtue of "not hitting the nail on the head, but playing around it" (Gaudet and Wooton 20). As
in a short story sequence, repetition and variation are favored over a straightforward development. In the “cut” technique used in some black music, Keith E. Byerman notes, the aesthetic structure, which abruptly skips back to previously heard beginnings, “marks a difference from the European notions of progress and resolution. . . . It envisions instead a world of organic process in which repetition and change are the only constants” (Fingering 7). If one substitutes the word novelistic for European above, the description of the pattern aptly fits a work such as Bloodline, whose stories reiterate common themes concerning the tension between rootedness and change through progressive variations. Finally, the call-and-response pattern that Byerman argues exists in much black verbal art contains parallels to the multiple voices that comprise Bloodline. Each voice is answered by the subsequent one of the next story, which returns to consistent themes and motifs; in addition, the volume concludes with echoes of previous voices by the multiple narrators of “Just Like a Tree.”

Such traditions form the background for other short story sequences by black writers that precede Gaines’s work. Todd Duncan (85) is the only commentator on Bloodline who cites other volumes that are part of an existing African-American tradition in the genre: Charles Chesnutt’s The Conjure Woman (1899) and Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children (1938). While lacking The Conjure Woman’s narrative frame and metafictional dimension, Bloodline shares its genesis in the oral tradition. Gaines’s fiction attempts to capture the storyteller’s voice heard so often in his youth: “I come from a long line of storytellers. I come from a plantation where people told stories by the fireplace at night. People told stories on the ditch bank. . . . I think in my immediate family there were tremendous storytellers or liars” (Laney 3).5 Like Chesnutt’s work, Bloodline also takes a critical stance—though a much more explicit one—toward the contemporary remnants of the plantation system.

Although Gaines did not read Uncle Tom’s Children until later in his career, Wright’s series of portraits thematically anticipates Gaines’s treatment of the tension between the black male’s struggle for self-realization and the community he is in danger of leaving behind. Wright’s men fight against oppression, but their individual efforts are portrayed as ineffectual unless they work together against injustice. Other African-American works that might be seen as precursors to Bloodline include Langston Hughes’s four volumes of Simple stories
(published between 1950 and 1965) and James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (1965). While Hughes's tales feature a common narrator and an urban setting, Baldwin arranges stories of black males in order of his protagonist's increasing age to sketch social change during roughly the same era as *Bloodline*. Only with Toomer's volume can one draw a direct line of influence to *Bloodline*, but Gaines's book should ultimately be linked with these representatives of the genre by black writers and seen as the precursor of such works as Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).

Beyond physical setting, *Bloodline* is unified by a number of themes that develop concurrently as the volume progresses: the definition of black manhood through conflict with white social institutions, the role of women and the community in relation to social progress, the failure of traditional religion, and the importance of visionary characters in defining the nature of change. These recurrent themes are sufficient to provide the volume with substantial intertextual unity, but the existence of a definite sequence of male protagonists provides a solid unifying framework. The following analysis, although schematic, foregrounds the stories' intertextuality within the volume and the complementarity of the themes in the individual narratives.

**Composition History**

Only three of the five stories that comprise *Bloodline* were published previously. "A Long Day in November," which Gaines started and then reworked while enrolled at San Francisco State and Stanford in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is not only the first story in the sequence but also the first to be written; Gaines published an abbreviated version in 1964. The volume's second story, "The Sky Is Gray," appeared in August 1963. According to John F. Callahan, the final story, "Just Like a Tree," also published in 1963, was the second one written ("Hearing" 107). The third and fourth stories—"Three Men" and "Bloodline"—appear for the first time in the collection.

Using Forrest L. Ingram's three distinct types of short story sequences—composed, arranged, and completed (17)—one might argue that Gaines was subconsciously composing the sequence, returning to the
locale with different perspectives until there seemed sufficient material to present a comprehensive treatment of his themes. Ascertaining that such a holistic vision preceded the work’s genesis, however, makes the volume no more unified or coherent, since it is the reader’s pattern-making faculties that must ultimately formulate the volume’s wholeness.

Nonetheless, as Gaines has remarked, the stories have been “definitely arranged” in an order that not only takes into account the narrators’ increasing ages but also seeks to portray a curve of “constant growth from the first to the last story” (O’Brien 91). This arrangement (discussed below in more depth) highlights the male protagonists’ growth in sensibility from the sheltered limitations of a childhood in the quarters to readiness as an adult, who has grown beyond the community but still not forsaken it, to confront a region in transition. Furthermore, the selection of “Just Like a Tree” as the final story provides the volume with a definite sense of closure.

In addition to expanding “A Long Day in November” to near-novella length, Gaines appears to have filled in the frame with stories featuring characters whose moral and ethical development fits between those of the young boy passively absorbing the environment around him in “A Long Day in November” and the departing activist Emmanuel in “Just Like a Tree.” Ultimately, however, the composition history serves only to highlight certain structural features the reader discovers during the sequential experience of negotiating the text, which involves positing interconnections, recognizing juxtapositions, and overcoming perceived gaps.

**Title**

A short story sequence’s title “adumbrates a cryptic meaning which the reader must decipher” (Kennedy 14). Adopted from the penultimate story, the volume’s title foregrounds the continuity that runs through the stories—not just a family bloodline but a racial one that relates the generations of residents segregated in the quarters and in the black sections of towns such as Bayonne. While the black bloodline is often perceived as monolithic, the stories themselves highlight the variety of skin colors and the complex and crossing lines of kinship that ultimately mingle in one continuous stream. As Duncan notes, the title “applies not only to
a specific story or to blood kin; it is a metaphor standing for Gaines’s entire network of implied kinship” emerging from a common ethos (100). That kinship is ultimately based on place and on a shared historical suffering that knits individuals together in families and as a community—much like the book itself. Thus the title becomes an appropriate organic metaphor for the volume’s unity, especially the sequential dimension that depicts the progress from the older generations to the next. However, the metaphor might also signal the presence of the affinities that kinship carries, alerting readers to the presence of reiterated characteristics, motifs, and themes. Thus the stories, like the characters within them, merge into a single bloodline, moving forward in time with a continuity that weaves diverse lives together.

By assigning to the volume as a whole the title of the story that most markedly emphasizes social inequities and that features the most developed radical sensibility, Gaines emphasizes the need to move forward as the old order is disappearing. In contrast, naming the volume after the final story, “Just Like a Tree,” would have stressed the Faulknerian endurance of the generation of old aunts and the value of rootedness in the vanishing community. While both dimensions are crucial to an understanding of Gaines’s vision, the relative balance of the two is altered by his emphasizing the penultimate story and the progressive, sequential dimension. Furthermore, Bloodline as a title carries connotations of blood spilled—past and future—in the struggle for change and subtly echoes the spatial image in the title story of “blood weeds” beside the road to the quarters.

**Structure, Pattern, and Arrangement**

Gaines does not precede the stories with a prologue, authorial note, map, or framing device. Instead, readers enter directly into the characters’ environment in the initial story and experience the sights, sounds, and smells with an immediacy granted by a young child’s perception. With each subsequent story, the vision becomes more sophisticated and the ethical problems more acute. The physical limitations of the quarters and the interpretive limitations of childhood ultimately give way to a more complex vision of experience, structurally represented by the multiple voices that comprise the final story. More than a random amal-
gamation of stories, *Bloodline* is arranged so that it builds out from the quarters to the town of Bayonne, then returns, via a decaying plantation, to the quarters. This movement not only expands the reader’s sense of the locale but also reaffirms the importance of the vanishing community, especially for the composite male character seeking to realize his independence outside its limits.

The general pattern of increasing age and greater sophistication of vision serves as a prototype for the progressive expansion of the reader’s own consciousness through the sequence. Six-year-old Eddie’s world of sight, sound, and sensation in “A Long Day in November” is related in terms of an ego still seeking a protective niche in a stable family. Eight-year-old James registers an increasing consciousness of the inequities of the cold world that he must face outside the quarters in “The Sky Is Gray.” In “Three Men” nineteen-year-old Procter Lewis comes to understand, under his fellow inmate’s tutelage, the societal forces that have delimited his behavior. The narrator of “Bloodline,” seventy-year-old Felix, offers a dispassionate view of the struggle for ascendancy between the old and new; by not presenting the story through the voice of the rebellious mulatto, Copper, Gaines allows the reader a glimpse inside the mind of a male representative of the generation raised before serious challenges to the South’s old order emerged. The final story’s polyphony of voices—incorporating young and old, male and female, black and white—demands a much more complex integration of perspectives that points toward the multiplicity of experience and the ongoing nature of social change.

Within the context of *Bloodline*, each story depicts a stage of growth, as progressively older black males come to terms not only with the forces within the black community but also with the wider Southern society that has historically delimited it. In essence, the five main characters become a composite protagonist; indeed, in Gaines’s sketch of the volume’s structure, he talks about the characters in the first three stories as if they were the same person. Duncan argues that the stories collectively gain “cumulative importance and power” by depicting the latter stages of Erikson’s eight epigenetic phases of personality development (86). While such a schema may represent an implicit ideal, the volume’s form undercuts the possibility of such a climactic progression by emphasizing the discontinuity inherent in the black male’s life cycle. Despite the common bloodline, the composite protagonist in fact suggests an identity
not totally integrated and the necessity for bridging experiential gaps that inhibit the growth process.

Even given the presence of discontinuity, the chronological arrangement of the stories naturally lends itself to the merging of the protagonists’ struggles into a loose evolutionary process, and Gaines’s choice of first-person narration subtly augments this process. Until the reader discovers differently, the I of one story, given no antecedent, might very well be the character from the previous one. Additionally, since each character reaches a threshold or stasis by the end of his story, the reader tends to expect that the older character who appears in the next will advance further as he meets increasingly more profound challenges. Gaines’s comments on Tee Bob (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman) and Jackson (Catherine Carmier) express faith that when characters achieve only a partial escape from the past, others may carry on: “This is the kind of thing I am doing in all of my work. These characters make an attempt toward change, and some other character might continue where they left off. But to break away from the past, from one philosophy to another, is a burden that one person cannot endure alone. Someone else must pick up and go from there” (O’Brien 84). This message clearly emerges from “Three Men,” and Bloodline’s discontinuous form reinforces the black community’s need to support and nurture change, even as the volume’s contents reveal its disintegration. The story sequence form is ideal for Gaines to affirm that one character may pick up at the threshold reached by the previous one, while at the same time he recognizes the limitations of each particular life. Those attempting to break from a repressive past thus seem less isolated figures.

Place: The Quarters, Bayonne, and St. Raphael Parish

That events in the five stories occur in the same place invites the reader to draw them together—to take their literal common ground and build them into a world of accumulative detail and internal consistency. Like every contemporary Southern writer, Gaines labors in the looming shadow of Faulkner, whose repeated returns to Yoknapatawpha County created a teeming fictional population and a realm of near-mythic proportion. While Faulkner occasionally journeyed outside of this terrain,
Gaines has focused exclusively on his own particular “postage stamp of native soil” located in and around Bayonne—the fictional equivalent of New Roads, Louisiana—seeking to understand what he has called “this Louisiana thing that drives me” (Rowell, “This Louisiana Thing” 40). He depicts a world united by a historical tradition that involves a sense of community, a legacy of oppression, and an ethos of struggle. Charles H. Rowell’s description of the quarters as “enclosed communities whose limited space forces each inhabitant into the private lives of others” (“Quarters” 739) could describe the sequence as a whole: an enclosed community whose limited space (confined within the covers of a volume) thrusts together the lives of separate individuals. Like the cabins whose doorways and front porches face the dusty roads leading to the fields, the stories share a common symbolic geography that dictates the nature of the protagonists’ struggles and forms the enduring reality of place.

The palpable sense of place is strongest in the early stories, related by narrators whose primary experience of the world is sensual rather than intellectual. Bitter cold dominates the first two stories; in subsequent stories, images of weathered houses, open fires, dust, cane fields, blood weeds, oppressive heat, rain, and mud all reinforce the prominence of the elemental and the constant struggle for survival. The segregated facilities in Bayonne complement the harshness of the weather in the second story, presenting a world that James’s mother shows him is fraught with subtle proscriptions and that demands calculated and creative strategies for survival. The obvious taboos involve crossing those physical boundaries that divide the town into separate but unequal districts, where services such as dentistry are decidedly discriminatory and the warmth of the white merchant’s store cannot be enjoyed without a ruse such as shopping for ax handles. The rain in the final story recalls the misery of the sleet in “The Sky Is Gray,” in which the weather serves as a metaphor for the cold white world that James must face with dignity in the segregated town and that Procter Lewis must face with courage in jail in “Three Men.” The penultimate story, “Bloodline,” sketches a plantation in decline, although while inspecting its fields, Copper envisions a revival of its former economic vigor. In the background, however, looms the inevitable Cajun ascendancy, which would lead to wholesale destruction of the quarters and its way of life.

“I suppose as children we loved the quarters,” Gaines has stated. “I
mean we loved it more than the people who owned it loved it, but we were limited" (Gaudet and Wooton 75). These limitations are evident in the volume’s first narrator, to whom the enclosed community is the world; his father, in contrast, seeks escape from the confines of an environment in which he will never rise above the status of a laborer or tenant farmer. While the central male characters in each story strive to transcend their surroundings, the female characters are generally better able to endure isolation and economic deprivation on a daily basis. As a community, the quarters constitutes a historically determined entity whose poverty and segregation perpetuate the antebellum social order. Although such conditions foster a desire for escape, they nevertheless provide the roots of strength and tradition. In one sense, the quarters is analogous to the Old South in Faulkner: an ambiguous conservatism preserves there both an outmoded and stultifying social code as well as the eternal verities of the human heart.

Segregation and the remnants of the plantation system constrict the existence of those in the quarters, yet while some of the parish’s white characters clearly perpetuate the old order, others seem determined to make a gesture that bespeaks their difference. The old woman in Bayonne, for instance, takes pains to aid James and his mother, although Octavia stubbornly insists on refusing charity until she casts the drama in terms of an exchange. Paul, one of the white police officers in “Three Men,” is more sympathetic than his sadistic partner T.J. and reminds Procter of a white man who used to cross the color line to play baseball with him and his friends. Despite Paul’s gentler character, he still enforces the expected show of deference by blacks toward whites. Finally, only two paths remain open to Procter in his clash with the white world: T.J.’s simmering hatred and physical abuse or the perpetual servitude that will result if he accepts the offer he expects from Roger Medlow to bond him out of jail to work on the plantation.

Frank Laurent in “Bloodline” provides a more in-depth characterization of the white planter, albeit a fading one without Medlow’s sway. Weakened by two heart attacks, he envisions himself as the last line of defense against Cajun ascendancy. Even though Laurent may not question the need to change from the ways of the waning white order, he fears and blocks the new order. Although he allows the descendants of the plantation’s slaves and sharecroppers to live rent-free on the land (perhaps in partial atonement for his ancestors’ injustice), his laissez-faire
paternalism may ultimately be as responsible for keeping the blacks' condition static as Medlow's manipulation of the system. Neither responsible for creating the social codes nor distant enough from his upbringing to change them, Laurent steers a middle course in an attempt to keep his world together and to retain his accustomed "dignity." With the older generation of blacks, he maintains some semblance of genteel decorum, though he still expects their deference. Yet Felix's compliance stems largely from personal respect, not from an acceptance of the old code. No longer submissive, Felix has carved out a unique relationship in which he holds his ground and speaks his mind, indulging in sarcasm and refusing to affirm his employer's illusions. Felix shares Procter Lewis's surface compliance and Octavia's subterfuge, but the gradual erosion of the system in the rural areas allows him greater success in extending his liberties and redefining his role. Frank Laurent may be weak, but he is more humane than his brutal but effectual brother Walter (whose nature Copper seems to have inherited); Frank finally admits his kinship with Copper, even as he resolves to fight the claim.

In "Just Like a Tree," Anne-Marie Duvall exhibits the courage to leave her comfortable hearth fire for an alien one to make a gesture that, though largely symbolic, affirms her emotional attachment to Aunt Fe across the physical and social obstacles that have grown more formidable with maturation and marriage. Less substantive than the food James and Octavia receive in "The Sky Is Gray," this gesture symbolizes buried emotional depths reflected in her attempt to bridge the racial gulf and follow the ancestral injunction to "look after" Aunt Fe. Certain limitations in her understanding are evident: she accepts the quarters' distant location as "ordained before" and yearns for a false innocence in her fantasy about being "a little nigger gal" who "could pick pecans and eat them under the big old dead tree" (241). She is unable to see behind the stereotyped vision of the "laughing black" and understand that the humorous facade of those gathered in Aunt Fe's cabin masks a deeper suffering. Her failure to comprehend the underlying causes of discontent becomes painfully evident when she speculates that the black agitators may want money to buy a car (a thought that contrasts with Eddie's struggle in the opening story to get rid of his car in order to regain his wife). She weeps only because of Aunt Fe's personal connection with her past and cannot fathom the deeper problems that animate racial unrest. As the volume's final representative of the white world,
Duvall offers a glimmer of hope, tempering Frank Laurent's paternalism with true compassion, but her remarks highlight the gulf that still exists between the two races in St. Raphael parish.

**The Composite Protagonist**

“All men have hopes, and all men brutalize other things near them, at home, when they cannot fulfill those hopes. I read Joyce’s Dublin stories, and I see the same sort of thing,” Gaines has observed (Gaudet and Wooton 44). Each story in *Bloodline* primarily concerns the growth of a young black male whose hopes of achieving manhood are in danger of being brutalized. Read in sequence, the experiences of each story’s male protagonist comprise a composite narrative of “a larger odyssey toward human dignity” (Babb 16). Initially, the environment of the quarters—with its potential to stifle, subvert, or misdirect the development of manhood—delimits the characters' possibilities for complete maturity. Nevertheless, Gaines makes it clear that continuity with the historical community embodied in the quarters must not be sacrificed in the struggle for self-realization.

In “A Long Day in November,” the young narrator, Sonny, receives part of his education in manhood by witnessing his father Eddie’s tribulations. Sonny’s main concerns in a world ordered by routine and dominated by sensation are elemental: warmth, comfort, elimination. Though he is clearly a long way from manhood, his chances of succeeding in school and escaping from the cycle hinge on Eddie’s presence as a positive role model who can mediate successfully between external forces and his own quest for manhood. While Jerry H. Bryant’s description of Eddie as “a whiner and a hand wringer” (“Gaines” 856) is apt, he is doubly compromised in the struggle for independence by the community’s expectations and by the limited alternatives available for defining manhood. Eddie measures his prowess by how much cane he can cut and how good a provider he is. Chafing under the limitations of the traditional communal definition of manhood, he has, however, become preoccupied with his car, a source of the mobility and power traditionally denied to the black male in the quarters.

Eddie finally transcends this obsession and assumes the status of manhood in the community’s eyes, but some doubts about his relative
success remain. Although burning the car is a sacrifice that represents capitulation, this dramatic action nonetheless raises his esteem in the community, as Gran'mon declares: “He's a man after all” (71). He demonstrates the power to control his own destiny by destroying something he wants in order to retain something he needs, yet Amy dictates the end of the episode: she will not let him pay for towing the car by salvaging its fuel pump, and later she compels him to beat her. Through the lessons of sacrifice and love orchestrated by females, Eddie overcomes a simplistic definition of manhood based on symbolic power.

In “The Sky Is Gray,” the father figure’s absence exacerbates the world’s harshness and forces Octavia to tutor her eldest son James in manhood. When he exhibits qualms about killing two redbirds, she beats him until he accedes to her will and learns to stifle his sympathies for the family’s welfare. Better able to endure adversity than Sonny, James suffers his toothache in silence to save the family money. Yet his trip to the dentist in town, with the crossings of the color line it necessitates, ultimately teaches him more about manhood than does enduring physical pain. His mother’s final words—“You not a bum. . . . You a man” (117)—show that he will no longer be allowed the latitude of childhood; he cannot turn up his collar against the sleet but must endure it with dignity. James, as Craig Werner notes, “has bought his manhood at the cost of his youth” (37); given that he is not that much older than Sonny, the cost is dramatized further by the story’s place early in the sequence.

Munford’s lesson to his fellow inmate in “Three Men” is that “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” (138). Just as channeling one’s energies into fixing and driving cars serves no constructive purpose in the first story, exhibiting machismo through sex and violence only steers the black male away from challenges that shape a strong, self-actualized person. Becoming a man involves hard moral choices that will break the cycle of dependency on the white world; a man with physical strength and sexual potency can still be caged, Procter finally realizes. Forced to make a difficult choice between self-preservation and self-willed adversity, he learns to separate animal urges from ethical behavior. His resolve to resist his white oppressors is couched in terms that remind readers of Sonny asleep in his bed at the end of the first story: “I didn’t want have to pull cover over my
head every time a white man did something to a black boy—I wanted to stand” (152). Unlike Sonny, Procter is ready to forsake the warmth of the figurative security blanket that would blind him to the injustice he knows exists.

Munford, like Octavia, deliberately repudiates the expression of emotion, and it is up to Procter to mediate between the two extremes of divergent manhood that the violent Munford and the more empathetic but passive homosexual Hattie Brown embody. At the same time Procter rejects Hattie, he changes his opinion about the qualities Hattie embodies, as is evident not only in his role as a physical comforter but also in his new attitude about crying. Initially, Procter believes that survival in prison demands suppressing tears of loneliness, yet when he realizes what his resolution to refuse Medlow’s help entails, he cries, temporarily overcome by frustration over injustice and by doubts whether others will follow him in resisting. Unlike Eddie’s public weeping, Procter’s catharsis transcends self-pity. It also sensitizes him to the plight of the recently beaten youngster put into the cell with him after Munford is released. Placed at the center of the collection, “Three Men” is the most optimistic story of the five: Procter, in discovering the route to authentic manhood—not exaggerated machismo—recoers a portion of his humanity as well as a measure of control over his own life.

Copper Laurent, in “Bloodline,” is a more tragic figure whose wider experience and mixed blood produce a more heightened consciousness. Recounting his ten years of experience in the world to Frank Laurent, he summarizes in Kurtz-like fashion what he has witnessed: “The suffering, the suffering, the suffering” (213). He has traveled widely, observing in many cities that “men like my father. Men like Walter Laurent” are responsible for the suffering and “they hide behind the law. The law they created themselves.” Like Munford, he has also been in prison and encountered firsthand the brutality inflicted on blacks by white jailers. These experiences have driven him close to the edge of insanity, and he appears to have less desire than Munford to educate others of his race in resistance, even though he speaks of raising an army of followers. In order to assert his manhood, he stands firm in his resolve to enter the plantation house by the front door, breaking the pattern of subservience as well as obtaining recognition both as a Laurent and as a man.

Duncan calls Copper the volume’s “culminating figure of young adulthood” (95), yet despite his determination and physical strength, he is...
clearly an ambivalent model. Able to express his ideas cogently and resolved to leave the plantation on his own terms, he earns the admiration of Felix, whose concluding description emphasizes Copper’s steadfastness. This quality nevertheless suggests his inflexibility and fanaticism, and his adamant militancy—so clearly ahead of its time—translates itself into a blind cruelty against those of his own race. His act of tying up fellow blacks with trace chains when they try to capture him, while possibly ironic, recapitulates his white fathers’ crime of slavery. Despite the visionary capacity Copper has derived from suffering, he has trouble seeing what is actually in front of him and treating others with compassion. While he may represent an older version of Proctor, he lacks those nascent virtues of the heart that appear at the end of “Three Men,” as his refusal to cry over the world’s suffering demonstrates. Yet for all Copper’s deficiencies, he maintains an attachment to the land he is determined either to possess or to bathe in blood. He stands as a forerunner of a generation of social activists and embodies a promise that the inertia of his own day will be overcome. Ironically, however, his reclaiming his birthright involves the reemergence of the callous masculine sensibility that initiated injustice.

Emmanuel, the young activist in “Just Like a Tree,” has, unlike Copper, grown as an organic part of the community from which he must depart. Lacking Copper’s delusions of grandeur, he participates in a small movement of nonviolent resistance. Although sketched only briefly, Emmanuel represents the culmination of the new manhood. Through telling the story of his grandfather’s lynching and mutilation, Aunt Fe has fostered his consciousness of the wrongs blacks have suffered down through the years. In striking contrast to Copper, Emmanuel begins with a consciousness of grief and suffering and rejects violence because of the potential repercussions against those who remain in the quarters.

Failed Religion and Wider Visions

Gaines presents his visionary characters against the background of organized religion’s failure to play its traditional role of providing social and political leadership. Gaines has expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of Christianity to heal the breach between generations of males:
“I don’t know that the Christian religion will bring fathers and sons together again” (Rowell, “This Louisiana Thing” 40). Furthermore, it failed to invigorate the movement for social change—at least during the era depicted in Bloodline, when “the Church was only concerned with sending someone to heaven [rather] than with creating social changes,” as Gaines has said (O’Brien 92). Not Christianity per se but rather the static, conservative forms that maintain the status quo come under attack in Bloodline.

In the opening story, religion is the first avenue to which Eddie turns in a crisis, yet Reverend Simmons’s counsel proves ineffectual. He urges Eddie to “be strong” and “kneel down sometime” with his family (43–44), but his all-purpose platitudes reveal no understanding of the situation. The conservative forces of religion are ultimately allied with matriarchs such as Gran’mom, who attempts to promote a sexual liaison between Amy and Freddie Jackson that Simmons fails to censure. Within the family, Amy is the impetus behind maintaining vestiges of religious observance, making Sonny kneel before his father for evening prayers. Ironically, when Sonny blesses those who have had a role in the reconciliation, the minister is conspicuously absent from the list.

Although the white woman’s nonpatronizing Christian charity brightens the second story’s otherwise gray sky, other characters exhibit Christian passivity. James’s aunt closes discussion about his father’s being drafted by stating, “All we can do is us job, and leave everything else in His hand” (108). The preacher in the dentist’s office, whose weight and gold chain indicate indulgence and prosperity, urges the women not to question the Lord’s mysterious ways and to maintain faith in the face of suffering, yet the student’s logic easily overcomes these shallow injunctions. Furthermore, the preacher’s inexcusable violence against the young agnostic indicates clearly which of the two has the Christlike ability to turn the other cheek.

As has Munford Bazille in “Three Men,” Copper has abandoned religion in frustration after repeated clashes with injustice: “I used to pray once. . . . But the same God I was praying to was created by the same ones I was praying against. And Gods only listen to the people who create them” (214). More effectual, he believes, would be claiming his share of earthly property and attempting to share it with other disenfranchised blacks. Munford delivers the most stirring denunciation of organized religion in the entire volume in a crude fable that sketches how
its emasculating effects begin unobserved when the preacher christens a baby boy: “At the same time he’s doing that mumbo-jumbo stuff, he’s low’ing his mouth to your little nipper to suck out your manhood” (140). Subsequent religious encroachment, he asserts, eventually perverts the sexuality of or bestializes black males.

Munford’s words are counterpointed by Hattie’s singing a spiritual in “a high-pitched voice like a woman” (143), thus suggesting that religious faith has become predominantly a feminine rather than masculine mode of coping with adversity. Although he is not visibly affected by the hymn, Procter nonetheless later urges the young boy who is placed in the cell to pray for him when the white guards take him for “interrogation”: “And I don’t want you praying like a woman, I want you to pray like a man. You don’t even have to get on your knees; you can lay on your bunk and pray” (153). As Procter’s lack of concern about an appropriate posture for praying indicates, he seeks only an expression of faith in something, not necessarily a standard religious creed. His hope that the next generation’s proponents of change can renew the faith he has lost echoes sentiments expressed by the young agnostic in the preceding story.

Although the first four stories present a generally negative view of religion’s role in reinforcing prevailing social conditions, the final story takes its title from an old Negro spiritual that alludes to the endurance and rootedness bred by deep and abiding religious faith: “Made my home in glory; I shall not be moved. / Just like a tree that’s planted ‘side the water.” Emmanuel’s recollection of the times he has walked to church with Aunt Fe illustrates that religion has the potential of binding the community together across generations. Her spiritual certainty, while inaccessible to many of the next generation’s young males, is depicted as an admirable source of strength; she dies after praying, certain of her ascent to her heavenly reward. The portrait of Aunt Fe readjusts the negativity suggested in the first four stories but certainly does not erase it. Traditional religious faith remains the domain of an older generation, and its conservative nature can serve to hinder change.

While there is some hope that future generations might renew this faith once the current irresolution and injustice pass, the more tangible promise for immediate change is invested in Bloodline’s visionary characters. Whether by design or by accident, each story features a character whose clarity of vision sets him or her apart from the others. By virtue
of intuition, reasoned reflection, or a heightened sense of history, each possesses an ability to see beyond the present in ways that others cannot. While some may serve as catalysts for personal or social change, others merely counterpoint reality with an ideal, uncorrupted vision. Their function may be to steer the protagonist to a clearer conception of his role in the black rural community, to challenge the complacency of Christianity, to break the cycle of dependence on paternal whites and foster self-reliance, to challenge the decayed plantation system and its right of succession, or to acclaim the role and value of the past when change finally becomes imminent.

Although such characters may at times seem authorial mouthpieces who utter “truths” that other characters are unwilling to accept because of self-interest or unwillingness to change, some are undercut by mild irony or revealed by juxtaposition to be able to see only part of the situation with clarity. Taken singly, each visionary character provides some recognition of potential remedies for the historical plight of Southern blacks; yet only when their visions are taken together—with all the inherent contradictions between past and present, head and heart, male and female, security and change—does a fuller answer to the complex question of change become clear.

Madame Toussaint, the conjure woman in “A Long Day in November,” understands the price that Eddie must pay for domestic peace. Duncan remarks that she embodies “a connection to intuition and to dimly remembered traditions on the Mother Continent” (87). Despite her mystic aura, this shrewd businesswoman’s insight into Eddie’s predicament may simply derive from her superior knowledge of the community and of human nature. She understands the sexual politics of domestic tensions engendered by life in the quarters, where the black male’s alternatives for exercising manhood are few and the married woman retreats into making her home serve as an emotional shelter from poverty.

The conjure woman’s first advice to Eddie, though somewhat oblique, lays out a less painful alternative than the second: it is easier to “give it up” than to set fire to the car, but Madame Toussaint seems to realize that the situation has worsened and will require more dramatic measures. As Walter McDonald notes, her advice urges sacrifice and love as the ultimate requirements of true manhood (47)—qualities that subsequent stories also affirm. Her prescription arises out of sympathy for the
plight of black women, victimized by husbands so obsessed with their own restlessness that they lose sight of their spouses’ needs. “You men done messed up the outside world so bad that they feel lost and out of place in it,” she observes. “Her house is her world. Only there she can do what she want. . . . Y’all never know how a woman feels, because you never ask how she feels” (61). Despite Madame Toussaint’s astute diagnosis of the communication problem, assigning blame to men for the outside world’s condition may be only partially valid, as later stories that depict the social situation in more detail illustrate. Madame Toussaint’s final scene, in which she subdues her ominous dog, may highlight her isolation and strangeness, but it also foregrounds female dominance in this story of manhood gone awry and subsequently reintegrated into the quarters community.

While Madame Toussaint’s association with the African past and her present-day community are the sources of her vision, the young student in the dentist’s office in “The Sky Is Gray” derives his from books and education. His words offer a prescription for change from the “cold logic” of an agnostic who sees God as an abstraction foisted upon blacks to keep them ignorant and disenfranchised. His logic is opposed by the preacher’s faith in the dictates of the heart. This dichotomy is reiterated in the title story, in which excesses of both are shown to be deficient. The student’s knowledge of language’s arbitrariness offers an escape from its stultifying connotations and gives him new power of assignment. Freed from the prison house of language, he moves closer to overcoming other conventions that limit his possibilities. His logic, however, leads to a somewhat precarious relativism and to isolation from those whose visions he might help clarify. To the initially sympathetic woman, he replies that he does not believe in God “because the wind is pink” (100), a statement that serves to isolate him further because she cannot comprehend his logic.

Yet if the wind can be pink and the grass can be black, as he contemplates, then perhaps James’s sky need not be gray. While the student may have no immediate effect on his adult auditors, James accepts him as a role model because of his clothes and books. James attempts to give his mother a book to read from the office tables and also exhibits a rudimentary understanding of the student’s ideas about color words when he observes that the woman’s outfit consists of “a green sweater under a black sweater” (101). John Callahan argues that “behind James,
Gaines’s stance toward the radical skepticism of this young man seems comically equivocal” (“Hearing” 97). Nonetheless, beyond his vision’s shortcomings and alienating influence, it contains a truth that may ultimately assist in reordering reality. The student must exist in a transitional world where old definitions cease to apply and new ones have not been formulated. Ultimately, his habit of questioning, no matter how strange his statements may seem to the community, will do more for progress than the survival ethic that merely helps those in the quarters endure the cycle of poverty.

In “Three Men” Munford is more successful in directly influencing an immediate personal change with his vision. He shares the student’s distrust of organized religion, but his main role is to reveal how the white power structure encourages blacks to fight among themselves, thus rechanneling the violence and rage bred by socioeconomic oppression. For this cycle to end, men such as Procter must shun the easy way out and stop allowing paternal whites to free them from jail. As Jack Hicks observes, however, Gaines depicts Munford “with a distanced irony reserved for his black rebels” (“To Make” 14). Urging Procter to resist is Munford’s only way of subverting the system, which has trapped him in a cycle of powerlessness, cynicism, and violence. In addition, the stoic Munford’s cruelty to their homosexual cellmate illustrates his lack of compassion. Procter must assimilate Munford’s vision and also synthesize it with Hattie’s ethic of compassion. Although Munford is not a complete model, he astutely perceives that the black man has allowed Southern whites to cast him as their negative image because “with us around, they can see us and know what they ain’t” (137–38). True escape requires a self-recreation in a new image.

Copper’s experiences in prison link him to previous characters, but he is much closer to the edge of madness than they are. He has witnessed social inequality on a larger scale than the inequality he experienced on the plantation and has returned staggered by the knowledge. Duncan calls him “one of life’s shell-shocked seers” (94). Copper now envisions himself as a “General,” leading shadow troops of the disenfranchised to claim the land and the rights due them. “The earth for everybody. Just like the sun for everybody. Just like the stars for everybody” (161), he remarks, but he bases his claim to the land on his Laurent heritage, not on his status as a human being. Because Copper’s gaze consistently focuses on some distant point rather than on those with whom he is speak-
ing, Felix compares him to a sleepwalker. Perhaps, however, nothing in the surrounding reality matches the particulars of his vision. Perpetually lost in abstraction, Copper has a habit of touching his left temple before he drifts off, signaling that his head may be overworked; like Munford, he has a deficient heart. Although more committed to active striving for social justice than any of the other visionaries, Copper seems the least able to relate his vision of impending revolution to the nearer human realities. His shadow army lacks any connection with the surrounding black community, whose men he spurns as tools of the white order. His frustrated quest turns into an obsession for justice that leaves behind those like Felix who have waited patiently for change. Nonetheless, Copper is sufficiently astute to know that with his vision currently unrealizable, he must settle for obtaining Frank's recognition of their kinship rather than leading his imaginary legions to reclaim the land.

Finally, “Just Like a Tree” contains two complementary visions that, rather than looking forward as Copper does, attempt to see the present within the context of the historical past. In Etienne’s section, the young activist Emmanuel is portrayed as the natural result of the deeply rooted human envy and greed that begat slavery and perpetuated a cycle of violence that will lead to Aunt Fe’s displacement. In the long view, both he and Aunt Fe are destined to be “turned over” by the winds of historical change. Accompanying Etienne’s acknowledgment of human smallness is a positive recognition of the place of these two within the bloodline’s shared history of suffering and their contributions to social change. Aunt Clo’s metaphoric description of an attempt to uproot an old tree complements this linear vision. Recognizing the void that Aunt Fe’s departure will create, she nevertheless affirms the persistence of the “taproot” that the elderly woman and other members of her generation have anchored in the soil. While Etienne places Emmanuel within the horizontal sweep of history, Clo looks down the vertical axis into the seeming void of a vanished community and perceives evidence of endurance.

The concluding story’s form—a progressive montage of ten different voices—reminds the reader that multiple perspectives yield a more comprehensive vision of experience. Such a way of seeing is necessary in order to get beyond dominant cultural myths and break the oppressive cycles that stand in the way of widening the horizons of blacks, both in the quarters and beyond. Since these visions occur in a sequence, it is tempting to perceive them as a hierarchy, arranged from simple to com-
plex, ever widening in scope. Yet *Bloodline*'s form challenges the reader to develop continuity among these visions, whose individual strengths and weaknesses—and whose variety of focus—suggest that they might be seen more productively as complementary, sweeping down the vertical axis of Aunt Clo’s rooted, communal past as well as across the horizontal axis of time that Etienne’s vision encompasses. In the context of the dissolution of an old way of life, clarity of vision along both axes is essential not only for progressing socially but also for preserving and renovating tradition. The work itself does not integrate the perspectives of its visionary characters, but it does suggest the need for a complex and comprehensive vision of social progress, ever evolving toward a viable combination of memory, imagination, and action.

**Closure**

Gaines’s choice of “Just Like a Tree” as the final story is extremely appropriate on both the formal and thematic levels. The first few lines of the spiritual in the headnote reiterate the resolve shown in the previous story by Copper, who demonstrates that he “shall not be moved” by either Frank’s injunctions or the men sent after him. In addition, the bad weather in the beginning makes it seem to Chuckkie’s mother “like this whole world coming apart” (224). Thus “Just Like a Tree” carries forward the previous story’s theme of the dying old order, but by focusing on the black community rather than on the white plantation house. Aunt Fe’s initial consent to move from her birthplace reiterates the theme of sacrifice—an ethic in which the men of the previous stories have been schooled. Yet her strong will echoes the complementary note of fierce independence that animates their struggles.

Like the volume itself, “Just Like a Tree” is a composite of voices and thus serves as a microcosm of the book as a whole in its merging of different perspectives on the same scene. Moussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Gaines has remarked, served as one prototype for this structure (Callahan, “Hearing” 112). Admittedly, each section of the story is not independent: with the shift to each subsequent speaker, the plot follows a linear progression through time up to Emmanuel’s departure and Aunt Fe’s death. The narrative voices are ordered so as to begin with Chuckkie, a young boy, and end with the oldest character, Aunt Lou, in a
manner similar to that which the voices in the preceding stories progress from Sonny to Felix. Thus the final story reschools the reader in the process of integrating the multiple voices, yet it reminds him or her that these voices exist in unresolved tension. The overall arrangement of the stories in *Bloodline* gives some sense of an increasing social consciousness, but the final story depicts the value of the communal past and the need to preserve the vivifying essence embodied in Aunt Fe, who appears "to affirm all and negate nothing" (Byerman, *Fingering* 86). Paradoxically, while the volume’s curve of growth and increasing independence suggests the likelihood of social change, the sequential element that moves the stories forward in time is balanced by another force: the abiding nature of place imbued with a history that lends continuity to character and overcomes disjunction. Ending the volume with "Just Like a Tree" emphasizes the rootedness in place that feeds Emmanuel’s courage and also introduces a feminine power that nurtures but does not stultify. As embodied in Aunt Fe, the feminine ethic is rooted in the community but stresses complementarity with the male struggle for self-realization. The bloodline that will dominate the future runs, finally, across gender lines. Flowing from Aunt Fe to Emmanuel, it carries the memory of past injustice and emerges in the nonviolent resistance Aunt Fe symbolically condones. Her immobility and endurance are transmuted into the revolutionary spirit that will invigorate a new order.

"Just Like a Tree" takes on a different character when it is considered in light of the development of themes in the preceding stories. Werner observes that "out of context, it seems to express Gaines’s helplessness before the contradictions which force him to admire the system which enslaved his ancestors. . . . In context, it marks a resolution of Gaines’s realistic and symbolic perceptions; it rejects the southern system, despite its noble elements" (36). Had the book concluded with "Bloodline," the call for a cataclysmic change from the sterile old order would have made such a rejection more absolute, yet Copper’s unrequited and somewhat fanatical idealism would lack realistic grounding and foster doubt about the possibility of resolving the gap between the real and ideal. In "Just Like a Tree," although the radical youth departs from the quarters, the conclusion is more hopeful since the masculine element receives its strength from the enduring African-American communal tradition. Exactly what Emmanuel will do is no more concrete than Copper’s promise to return, yet he will preserve a noble spirit of resis-
tance cultivated under the old order. However, as William Burke notes, while the future may appear to bode well for male dignity, consoling maternalism will be absent (544).

Given the context provided by *Bloodline*’s setting and themes, the short story sequence form becomes a structural analogue for the two seemingly contradictory historical impulses that Gaines’s stories depict. The generic autonomy of the stories emphasizes the historical separation—from each other and from the community—that is part of the black male heritage. At the same time, the volume’s sequential and associative dimensions join the lives of its distinct characters and organize them into a sequence that sketches—a coherent vision of progress that recognizes the tension between continuity and change.

Like other short story sequences, *Bloodline* demands that the reader begin to understand the larger story emerging from the inherent connections between lives united by a common setting that dictates shared struggles. Gaines illustrates that these seemingly disjunct lives partake of a single bloodline—one that may be connected in a meaningful sequence that not only reaffirms a vanishing and ambiguous community but also reasserts the importance of the nascent spirit of social change emerging at the same time the community becomes weaker. Gaines has remarked that “there are certain things that, yes, I do want retained, I want kept. However, we have not reached a point in our lives of knowing how to keep this and make changes, too” (Gaudet and Wooton 49). Yet this short story sequence appears to embody that possibility, encapsulating the communal legacy and ultimately connecting it to a progressive spirit.

Form and theme thus converge neatly, as the formal paradox of each story’s simultaneous independence and interdependence reflects not only each maturing individual’s movement away from the past toward self-realization and manhood but also his unseverable relationship with the larger community and its “feminine” virtues of compassion and endurance. Because the volume’s disjunction and heterogeneity coexist with overarching unities derived from the common locale and the arrangement of the five stories, the reader is spurred to trace and connect the repeated motifs that promote the loose overall coherence in this community of stories. Paradoxically, in doing so, the reader recreates and thus preserves a historical community that is in the process of
dissolution as time and social change transform it. The deep structure
generated from the repeated themes and scenarios that bind the stories
thus becomes the bloodline linking the diverse struggles over time. While
the progressive, sequential dimension of *Bloodline* affirms the value of
progress and change that will be the fruit of independence from the his-
torical roots of oppression, the spatial unity established over the course
of the volume affirms the respect for the communal past that must not
be abandoned. For Gaines, the form of the short story sequence helps
capture this dynamic tension between opposite impulses and ultimately
serves as a formal reflection of his hope that the pulse of place will
continue to animate the new order.

**Notes**

1. The debate continues over the more appropriate name for this form. Both
Ingram and Mann employ the term *cycle*. Kennedy follows suit in a recent spe-
cial issue of *Journal of the Short Story in English*, although he remarks that
the more general term *short story collection* might suffice. Other names for
the form have also been proposed, ranging from *rovelle* to *short story com-
posite*. Nevertheless, I prefer the label *short story sequence* because of its affinity
with the poetic sequence and the dominant sequential dimension of the reading
experience.

2. A number of critics have commented on one or more of *Bloodline*’s various
unities. Mann includes a listing for *Bloodline* in her annotated bibliography.
Bryant (“Gaines”) and Hicks (“To Make”) examine the role of history in delim-
iting the individual struggles. Burke, McDonald, and Shelton (“Ambiguous”)
focus on the central importance of the theme of manhood. Byerman (*Fingering*)
traces the narrators’ quests for “the presence that must always be deferred” (74)
in his study of the black folk aesthetic. Callahan (“Hearing”) discusses the im-
portance of voice in creating a unified landscape. Duncan argues that the volume
depicts stages in Erikson’s model of the human life cycle. Roberts (“Individual”)
examines a theme that runs throughout the volume but looks only at its presence
in the first two stories. Werner’s study of Gaines’s debt to Joyce contains the
best discussion of the volume’s closure. Babb provides the most comprehensive
explication of the volume as “a connected whole, a bildungsroman depicting a
quest toward manhood and stressing the importance of family and community
in the making of dignity” (15).

3. For a more extended discussion of the Joycean influence on Gaines, see
Werner 34–40.
4. “When I did not find my people in the Southern writers, I started reading books about the peasantry of other places,” Gaines has stated. “I read the John Steinbeck people of the Selinas [sic] Valley, the Chicanos as well as the poor whites” (O’Brien 83).

5. For Gaines’s most extended remarks on the oral tradition, see Gaudet and Wooten 7–21.


7. See O’Brien 91.