They could not keep from you—
What reaches them
Making them ill at ease, fearful?
Today they shout prohibition at you
"Thou shalt not this"
"Thou shalt not that"
"Reserved for whites only"
You laugh.

One thing they cannot prohibit—
The strong men . . . coming on
The strong men gittin’ stronger.
Strong men . . .
Stronger . . . (57–58)

Brown’s treatment of resolution and strength against oppression is a fitting salute to a generation of old black men who have borne the shame of symbolic emasculation in America. His strong men, like those of A Gathering, have suffered lives of degradation but are able to affirm their dignity in their waning years. Thus Gaines’s novel of protest among a group of old black Louisiana men is likely to stir the consciousness of elderly readers touched by reflections of their own private battles for respect. It is also likely to touch readers who are genuinely troubled by discrimination against older black men throughout the United States.
“The Sound of My People Talking”: Folk Humor in
_A Gathering of Old Men_

Milton Rickels and Patricia Rickels

Ernest J. Gaines creates his characters through their voices. He has said that in all his books he is trying to capture “the sound of my people talking” (Lecture). The _Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman_ is the longest, most sustained of his voices, comparable in its aesthetic discipline to Mark Twain’s _Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_. Bloodline, too, presents its stories in a series of voices, from that of the small boy in “A Long Day in November” to that of old Felix in the title story. In _A Gathering of Old Men_, there are fifteen voices. Beginning with the child Snookum, just old enough to play mama and papa in the weeds with Minnie, they include five white voices and are most expressive in those of the old men. Their voices richly reveal their tragic communal history and their individual personalities, accustomed to enduring but at last finding strength to change their world.

The first critics of the book praised its humor. Reynolds Price perceived it as built “with large and singleminded skills, a dignified and calamitous and perhaps finally comic pageant” (15). The qualification “perhaps finally comic” reminds us that the categories of tragic and comic are not always helpful in categorizing twentieth-century novels. But despite the work’s ambiguous mode, the voices—sometimes interior, sometimes articulated—are certainly rich in humor. Even in the most sombre scenes, varied tones of humor expand and deepen the meanings of character and action.

Colloquial repetition, with its pauses and reversals, characterizes the
dialogue throughout the work, and at times this technique includes humor both to intensify meanings and simultaneously to modify and contrast relationships between characters. “Humor,” Gaines said in a recent interview, “depends on that sense of pausing” (Gaudet and Wooton 91–92). Midway in the confrontation between the sheriff and the old men, all of whom claim to have shot the Cajun farmer, Johnny Paul engages Sheriff Mapes in a grueling dialogue. The men have begun recounting tales of terrible brutality inflicted on their families down through the generations. The survivors’ choices were to die or to swallow their anger and suffering. As Mapes perceives a new pattern of defiance emerging, he says, “I see.” “You see what?” old Johnny Paul asks. Then the Lejeune brothers interrupt, each to claim he has killed Beau Boutan. Again Mapes says, “I see. . . . I see.” To this old Johnny Paul grunts, “No, you don’t see”; and turning to address all the old men and women gathered in Mathu’s yard, he invites, “Y’all look. . . . Look now. Y’all see anything?” “I see nothing but weeds, Johnny Paul,” Mapes says. “Yes, sir,” Johnny Paul says. “Yes, sir, I figured that’s all you would see. But what do the rest don’t see? What y’all don’t see, Rufe?” (87–88)

What Johnny Paul is looking toward as he speaks is the weed-covered site of the house where his mother and father once lived. What he does not see are the houses and flower gardens that used to make up the quarters. Johnny Paul invites the members of his community not only to remember what is gone but to consider another indignity: the farmer Beau Boutan had threatened to plow up the old, largely unmarked cemetery. Johnny Paul presents his fear: “One day that tractor was go’n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was. Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules” (92). If the cemetery is plowed off the face of the world, the dignity of the old work will be utterly destroyed and the life of the present further impoverished.

This weighty scene is serious but not solemn in its tone. The contrapuntal repetition of see throughout the dialog—“I see, I see,” “No, you don’t see,” “What y’all don’t see?”—is humorous, partly because of the strain and failure to communicate across cultures, partly because of the word’s stubborn persistence, partly because of what Mapes would feel as its uppity defiance. The verbal repetition echoes the technique of the blues refrain; it savors the bittersweet life of suffering, anger, joy,
accomplishment, and endurance shared by the black community. Repetition emphasizes and deepens the symbolic weight of seeing: it takes on complex accretions of knowing and feeling. The inarticulate lives that rise to expression in the pressure of this encounter are commemorated in the telling.

At the same time the sheriff, representative of the white man’s law, is forced to hear harrowing litanies of injustice and, simultaneously, is told he will never be able to understand what he hears. Mapes can never see. He feels the old men are pressing him to understand a point of view that his culture has traditionally denied existed, a point of view he and his community have in the past suppressed by force. With guns and voices, the old men are, at a deep level, forcing Mapes to witness their turning the world upside down. Mapes is a brutal, ordinary man, and what he does not see further reduces his humanity. When Gaines reads this scene aloud, Southern white audiences laugh with him in shared pleasure in humor’s ancient power to diminish the authority figure and to celebrate man’s capacity to thrash about and stand upright, even at the edge of the grave.

In a later scene, middle-aged, white Miss Merle brings two baskets of sandwiches to the murder site. Gathered there in Mathu’s yard and on his porch are all the old men; Candy Marshall, the plantation owner’s niece; Sheriff Mapes and his deputy Griffin; the black women Beulah and Glo; Glo’s three grandchildren; and Candy’s fiancé, Baton Rouge newspaperman Lou Dimes. Lou, who presents this scene, sees Miss Merle drive up, get out with a covered basket, and say something to Griffin. The deputy goes back to her car, then follows her into the yard, with the basket in one hand and the gun in the other, and you could see Mapes looking at him as if he were wondering if he actually needed Griffin the rest of the day. Miss Merle didn’t come up to Mapes, or Candy, or me first, she started dishing out sandwiches to the first one she came to. I supposed she felt that since we were all conspirators together, one was no better than the others, so she just started dishing out sandwiches to the first person she got to, fussing all the time.

“Just look at this, I mean just look at this—just look at it.” Dishing out sandwiches and fussing. “I hope you like ham and cheese because there isn’t anything else. Just look at that. I mean just look at that. Hurry up with that other basket,” she said over her shoulder to Griffin. Griffin brought her the full basket, and she handed him the empty one. So Griffin was
standing there with an empty basket in one hand and a loaded revolver in the other. “Can’t you put that thing away for a second?” Miss Merle asked him. “Who are you going to shoot, the hog?”

“No, Ma’am,” Griffin said.

“Just look at that,” Miss Merle said, looking at Griffin. Then she looked at the rest of us. “Just look at that.” (125–26)

Miss Merle’s scandalized iteration of “Just look at that” in this passage expresses her boundless exasperation at this awful breach of decent behavior by everybody she sees. At the same time, her incongruous hospitality introduces into the grim scene a traditional festive motif of folk humor—communal eating. Nobody refuses the sandwiches, and with Beau’s blood drying on the weeds, they all eat. Lou observes that Miss Merle does not follow the hierarchy of the local caste system in handing out the sandwiches. Her failure of etiquette implies the world turned upside down, the element of carnival in the complex web of meaning around this murder. The humor in the above passage rests on the intrusion of Miss Merle’s obsessive and indomitable hospitality into the threatening confrontation, on her ineffectual attempts to correct and control, and most fundamentally on the ancient comic celebration of life itself: the irrational assertion that before law and order, before revenge or justice or dignity or civilization, first comes life, the basic sacred thing.

In addition to the technique of colloquial repetition, A Gathering has other elements of traditional humor, notably a set of images from the culture of oral folk humor. Sometimes these are characterizing details: the fat, constantly sweating sheriff; the ever-present wet cigarette hanging from Dirty Red’s mouth; the old men’s nicknames: Clabber, Coot, Chimley, Rooster. These nicknames—descriptive, derisive, affectionate—the gift of the whole community, must be endured, appropriated, and finally celebrated. The play with names as identity or mask, with naming as loving or hating, with meanings inside and outside the community, acquires complexity throughout the novel. By the concluding courtroom scene, when the newspeople laugh at the old men’s nicknames, the reader, now an insider, understands their laughter as missing the point.3

As a set, the images drawn from folk humor emphasize the physical ground of humanity, or as Mikhail Bakhtin maintains, the diversity rather than the uniformity of human appearance. They voice the fact
that individuals are never, as classical aesthetics implies, harmonious, balanced, and complete, but rather are always in process (25ff). They are old or young, fat or thin, sick or well, flourishing or dying. As personalities, they are sometimes subservient and fearful, sometimes aggressive and threatening, sometimes wise, sometimes foolish. To Gaines, the varieties of humanity, the endless exfoliation of individual and community, are not threatening in their instability but rather exhilarating and, more often than not, promising.

This hope that Gaines holds for his characters, rising out of eternal renewal and change, pervades the novel so that, for all that it deals with oppression, suffering, violence, and death, A Gathering is comic in the most ancient sense of the term: its theme is rebirth, regeneration, resurrection. Not the Christian myth but an older and more elemental one is evoked in the image of Beau Boutan lying shot to death in the weeds, flies feasting on his blood, his face caked with dirt, and his hair full of dry grass seeds. Repeated twice early in the novel (51, 60), this image sets a tone of brutal realism yet holds within itself the germ of new life. In this most unpastoral of books, images from nature abound. Plants and animals, blood and dirt are recurrent motifs that establish the cultural and mythic meanings of Gaines’s drama, as they are repeated, combined, and recombined with variations. Weeds are ubiquitous, having taken over the flower gardens and ditches of the quarters and now threatening to invade the graveyard. Neither beautiful nor useful, they represent natural vigor, the life force in its most primitive form, as the rows of sugar cane stand for man’s regimented version of nature, harnessed for economic gain. The plant world teems on every page—grass, bloodweeds, bushes, turnips, beans, roses, four-o’clocks, palm-of-Christians (under which the plantation children play at lovemaking), oaks, pecans, willows, sycamores, and cypress. As Walt Whitman says of the grass in “Song of Myself,” “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (34).

Blood is everywhere—on the grass by Beau’s corpse; on the bodies of the dead and wounded; in the veins of the racist gang, who need a lynching “to pump blood back into their dying bodies” (143); and in the animals (which figure so prominently in Gaines’s descriptions and metaphors) alive or killed by hunters, fishermen, or butchers. There are alligators, deer, wildcats, fish, horses and mules, rats, rabbits, chickens and chicken hawks, bears, hogs, possums, dogs, birds, flies, bedbugs, spiders, mosquitoes, mud daubers, rattlesnakes, and water moccasins.
As for dirt, it is the element that binds everything together. Soil that inspired the plantation system consumed at last the flesh of master and slave alike. Dirt, the great equalizer, represents the destruction of distinctions and illusions. The last in a line of plantation “aristocracy,” Candy disposes of a weight of Southern legend by calling her family’s plantation “a few miles of dirt” (176). Luke Will and his gang of bullies are called “the dirt-plant boys” because they work at the Dixie Gravel, Cement, and Dirt Company. Their hands are so filthy that at the bar grit lies in the bowl of ice after they reach into it (161). When the time of reckoning comes for black and white alike, Charlie says triumphantly, “We all in the dirt now, and it ain’t no more Mister and no more Miss” (205).

A set of traditional abusive words, rooted in allusions to lower-body parts and functions, also appears from the culture of folk humor. These are carefully modulated. The most violent are used by Luke Will and his followers, a gang who decide to Lynch Beau’s killer. Luke Will calls Beau’s brother, an LSU football star who refuses to take part in any lynching, “the All-American fart” (163). The youngest, most childish of Luke Will’s followers is richest in his vocabulary of obscenities. After a few drinks, Leroy says, “Shit, I can’t wait. Let’s go kick some ass” (166). He accompanies Luke Will’s mob to the Marshall plantation, only to find himself hiding with the others behind a tractor as the old black men fire at them from all angles. “Y’all didn’t say they had all them guns,” he says (202). “No shit,” is the mock-sympathetic reply. When he threatens to give himself up, one of Leroy’s companions says, “You walk out of here and I’ll blow your back off. . . . You in it, fucker. You go’n stay here till the end” (202).

When used by the old black men, the vocabulary of abuse is markedly less frequent and less violent. During the encounter with the sheriff, Deputy Griffin is characterized by his impatient willingness to shoot somebody and by his slight build, focused in a traditional synecdoche. When he says he would not bear from the blacks what Mapes is tolerating, old Tucker asks, “And what would you do, you little no-butt nothing?” (94). In the opening scene of the novel, Snookum, on his errand to rouse the community, rides like Monty Python, “spanking my butt the way you spank your horse when you want him to run fast” (6). Butt, then, is established as a child’s term, and when used by the old men, it connotes comically engaging politeness in its restraint of insult.
Later, after a long exchange with Johnny Paul, Griffin asks the sheriff how much he is going to take. Mapes orders him to go check the police radio, and old Rufe observes, “That little spare-butt, slack-pants deputy left the yard walking all tough” (100). At the end of the scene, Griffin again asks, “Why don’t we just throw that old coon in the back of the car and take off?” (110). Old Yank, with humorous tolerance, observes, “He’s sure got a big mouth for somebody with hardly any butt” (110).

This traditional synecdoche locates man’s essential self, his biological life and the power to maintain it, in his buttocks. Yank’s comment is a more rural, more decent version of the street-talk expression “His mouth has wrote a check his ass can’t cash.” The intent is judgmental and reductive, but the extravagance and incongruity of the imagery imply a shared humanity, not the detachment and intellectual superiority of satire. Yank’s grotesque images are tolerant, not hateful, perhaps expressive of human brotherhood with even Griffin’s narrow-hipped humanity.

The grotesque set of images throughout A Gathering includes many references to eating in incongruous places or under incongruous circumstances. Sometimes the eating is purely metaphoric, as when, early in the story, the sheriff asks old Clatoo if it isn’t a little late for him to be “getting militant.” Clatoo says, “I always been militant. My instence gone sour, keeping my militance down” (87). Later Tucker ends the story of his brother’s murder, which he witnessed, with an image of fear undigested: “Been in here all these years, boiling in me,” hitting his chest. “Done spoiled my instence. Fear. Fear. Done spoiled my instence. I don’t know how come I’m still alive” (96). This impassioned cry from a life imaged as a belly full of fear issues as a declaration of freedom: “Cause this is the day of reckoning and I will speak the truth” (94). The struggle against fear and its conquest is the source of both comic release and, as here, an eloquent lamentation, giving voice to the transformation old Tucker has achieved.

The episode of Miss Merle’s distributing sandwiches, quoted above, serves as another example. Lawmen and confessed murderers munch their sandwiches together while the flies dine on the blood of Beau Boutan’s corpse, the occasion for the macabre picnic. Some of these images of eating imply a mythic vision of man’s union with the earth. As Chimley, Yank, Dirty Red, Mat, and some others walk through the old black cemetery, Cherry Bello, the narrator of this section, pauses at
his own family graves. “After I knelt down and prayed over my own family plot, I wandered over to where Dirty Red was standing all by himself. He was eating a pecan and looking down at the weeds that covered the graves” (46). Cherry sees that some of the graves are sunken. “My brother Gabe there,” Dirty Red said.” As Cherry watches, he notes, “As soon as he said it he cracked another pecan with his teeth.” Cracking and eating pecans, Dirty Red says, “Graveyard pecan always taste good. . . . You tasted any of them?” (47). Dirty Red is closer to the earth than Mark Twain’s raftsman who lauds the nutritious quality of Mississippi River water with an exemplum from cemeteries: “Trees won’t grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a St. Louis graveyard they grow upwards of eight hundred foot high. It’s all on account of the water the people drank before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don’t enrich a soil any” (24). Mark Twain’s humor rests on caste distinctions: the reader enjoys the raftsman’s simplicity and his lack of sensitivity. Gaines’s reader may enjoy his old men’s responses in the graveyard also, but because the image here is food, not simply trees, and Red is eating what grows from his brother’s grave, this image invites deeper symbolic interpretations. Humans literally grow out of their family, whose bodies nourish them. And although the individual dies, mankind is immortal, and our lives can be seen as part of a great, endless earthly cycle of birth and death and birth. Red’s communion with the past and with his brother is direct and satisfying. He invites the rest of the community to eat with him. On the reader’s reflection, the grotesque here disappears. Red’s superficially comic breach of middle-class decorum reveals a grand if unspeakable truth.

Another set of images in Gaines’s work deals with representation of God. Generally the imagery is anthropomorphic and consequently reductive of divine majesty. Miss Merle, passing out sandwiches, is “sure God had made a mistake putting her here at the same time He did Mapes” (127). Late in the book, Mapes learns that Fix Boutan, Beau’s father, has had to learn from his football-playing son that Gil does not want the family’s name in the paper for a lynching on the day before LSU’s big game with Ole Miss. When the old men show disappointment at not getting to shoot at Fix, Mapes tells them it is their own fault for praying for integration: “Y’all wasn’t satisfied Salt played at LSU on one side of town, and Pepper played for Southern on the other side of town. . . . Y’all prayed and prayed and prayed. . . . You told God you
wanted Salt and Pepper to get together, and God did it for you. At the
same time you wanted God to keep Fix the way Fix was thirty years ago
so one day you would get a chance to shoot him. Well, God couldn’t
do both” (170–71). Mapes’s folk-theological insight into the contradic-
tory demands of Christians opens a valid problem, but his imputation
d of divine limitation is comically reductive. Mapes’s baffled God recalls
Miguel de Unamuno’s witty praise of a humble God: “The greatest act
of humility is that of a God who creates a world that adds not one whit
to his glory, and then creates a human species to criticize his work” (55).

In black communities the preacher is often a personage of great digni-
ty and power, but Reverend Jameson, alone of all the Marshall plant-
tation men, crumples under pressure. Timid and fearful, he cuts a figure
first pitiful, later comic. As the shoot-out begins, Coot recalls, “I could
hear Jameson over by the house calling on God to have mercy on all of
us. If it wasn’t Jameson calling on God, it was Glo calling for her little
grandson Snookum. Jameson, then Glo; Glo, then Jameson. I heard
Dirty Red call to Rooster to go shoot Jameson and shut him up. Jameson
musta heard it too. There wasn’t another word from him” (198).

In some of Gaines’s other works this comic treatment of religion and
preachers embodies a very dark vision in imagery of the most wildly
comic fantasy. In the short story “Three Men” from Bloodline, Mun-
ford Bazille explains to a fellow prisoner how homosexuals came to be
in the world: “I’ll tell you. It start in the cradle when they send that
preacher there to christen you. 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.” Munford says that at his own baptism, although his
whole family was there, only he saw what was really happening: “This
preacher going ‘Mumbo-jumbo, mumbo-jumbo,’ but all the time he’s
low’ing his mouth toward my little private. Nobody else don’t see him,
but I catch him, and I haul ‘way back and hit him right smack in the
eye. I ain’t no more than three months old but I give him a good one.
‘Get your goddamn mouth away from my little pecker, you no-teef, rotten,
egg-sucking sonofabitch. Get away from here, you sister-jumper,
God-calling, pulpit-spitting, mother-huncher. Get away from here, you
chicken-eating, catfish-eating, gin-drinking sonofabitch. Get away, god-
damn it, get away’” (140). As Munford sees it, the black preacher helps
to unman the black community. His dark vision is presented in the
manner of a folk tall tale, the tale of a mythic hero in his cradle triumph-
ing through quick wit, an Achilles-like voice, and Herculean physical strength. The comic myth is earthbound: one survives by his own resources and in spite of what is called spiritual help.

The climactic battle scene in *A Gathering*, for all its waste, is also part of the comic ground; it creates a distinctive tone that includes laughter and the exultation of liberation, yet is finally deeply human and paradoxically fruitful. By nightfall, the old men come to desire the violence under which their community has lived in fear. When they learn from Sheriff Mapes that Fix Boutan will not lead a lynch mob into the quarters to avenge his son’s death, they feel disappointed. All day they have withstood both brutal and subtle attacks on their dignity with transforming grace, and now they want the ceremony completed. Even Rooster, whose wife has had to make him borrow a shotgun for the gathering, feels his new self uncompleted: “We had cranked usself up for a fight, and we wanted usself a fight” (170). Mapes’s pleasure at the confrontation avoided is incomprehensible to Rooster, who is in another realm. “I had never seen a happier white man in all my born days” (171) is his ironic commentary.

Then suddenly Luke Will and his friends arrive to demand a lynch victim, as their culture dictates. But Big Charlie and the old men refuse to be victims any longer. Fired upon, they “bust out” of Mathu’s house to find places in the weeds, ditches, and yards of the quarters to shoot back. For the black men it is a carnival of excitement: “I want to get that son of a bitch myself,” Clattoo says, and Coot responds, “No more than I do. We didn’t all get a chance at Beau, but we got a chance at him” (197). As they shoot, they express their high spirits, yelling “the way you holler at a rodeo when somebody’s riding a bucking horse, ‘Yahoo.’” Coot recalls, “They hooted and fired. You woulda thought you was listening to a bunch of Indians—Lord have mercy.” With comic piety, this World War I veteran thinks, “I didn’t know the last time I had felt so good. Not since I was a young man in the war. Lord have mercy, Jesus” (196–99).

The men are well aware that they have undergone an October metamorphosis. Big Charlie, who finally returns from the swamps to claim responsibility for murdering Beau, says of himself, “A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I’m a man” (187). And, near the end, Mathu says, “I been changed. . . . I been changed. Not by that white man’s God. I don’t believe in that white man’s God. I been
changed by y'all. Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot—you changed this hard-hearted old man” (182). Mathu’s transformation is not the work of Reverend Jameson or of God, but of the community, which realizes its strength in a gathering of old sons of earth.7.

The concluding violence focuses on Charlie. Rooster reports, “He had been running, and he had laid down on the ground. I could smell the sweat, the fields, the swamps in his clothes” (183). In his new courage, Charlie walks right toward the vigilantes, firing as he approaches. He kills Luke Will and is in turn killed. As he lies dying “like a big old bear,” Dirty Red says, “I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he found back there in the swamps might rub off on me. After I touched him, the rest of the men did the same. Then the women, even Candy. Then Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him too” (209–10).8 Through his contact with the earth, Charlie has been transformed and in death becomes himself a magic source of courage and power.

The trial scene with which the novel concludes is created in the voice of the reporter Lou Dimes. Here the powers of life and the powers of death, the powers of old orders and the powers of new orders appear reduced, in a subtly modified form comically domesticated. The heroic old men, who killed the symbol of brutal oppression, now return to the everyday, however well everyone in the community knows that things will never be the same again. The humor of the trial is tonally crafted to bring readers down from the high drama, culminating in three funerals. Everyone had taken baths and spiffed up so that in the courtroom “you smelled nothing but Lifebuoy soap and mothballs” (211). There is a good deal of laughter during the proceedings, mostly from the news people present, “who took the whole thing as something astonishing but not serious” (212). The best fun for all the spectators comes when the judge demands that Sheriff Mapes speak up. Full of impotent rage, Mapes finally admits that “the whole fight, I was sitting on my ass in the middle of the walk. Luke Will shot me, and I was sitting on my ass in the middle of the walk. Now, is that loud enough?” (213). At this even Judge Reynolds has a good laugh. In sentencing the old men, the judge says he is “putting all of them on probation for the next five years, or until their deaths—whichever came first” (213). Thus heroic old age becomes the occasion for a cruel reminder of human mortality, couched as “just a joke.”
Like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and that minor antebellum classic of American literature, Thomas Bangs Thorpe’s “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” *A Gathering* moves through comic realism into the realm of myth. Richard Slotkin argues that the myth of regeneration through violence is “the structuring metaphor of the American experience.” What he calls “true myths” arise out of the individual and communal experiences of a people’s history “and thus constitute part of that inner reality which the work of the artist draws on, illuminates, and explains” (4–5). For Gaines, the history of his own Pointe Coupee Parish people is the true myth, and their voices, painstakingly remembered and recreated, provide the medium for his artistic illumination of that myth.

**Notes**

1. For additional comments by Gaines on this element in his writings, see Gaudet and Wooton 7–12.


3. Significantly, Mathu—the novel’s center of dignity, wisdom, and power—is never “called out of his name,” that is, addressed by whites by a patronizing title such as Uncle or a nickname. On naming, see Gates “Criticism in the Jungle” and Bentson. For a discussion of naming in *A Gathering*, see J. Griffin. To the reader familiar with the culture of south Louisiana, the abundance of nicknames is an added touch of realism. Among African Americans and Cajuns of Pointe Coupee and neighboring parishes, nicknames sometimes displace Christian names, even in telephone directories and obituary notices, where the deceased, the pallbearers, and even the officiating priest may be so designated.

4. For a full discussion of the forms and functions of the language of folk humor, see Bakhtin, especially chapters 3, 5, and 6. For a recent evaluation of his theories, see Kinser, especially 253–54. When the scene of eating in the cemetery is connected with the eating beside Beau Boutan’s corpse, the carnivalesque tone of the image set is reinforced and deepened, ambiguously implying a new and better life may come from death. See Bakhtin 110–11, 218.

5. For a discussion of Gaines’s treatment of religious leaders see Gaudet “Failure.”

6. There are many episodes in African-American literature in which the element of celebration is incorporated into scenes of riot, destruction, and death. The best known of these is in chapter 25 of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. See
also Ann Petry’s story “In Darkness and Confusion” and Langston Hughes’s Jesse B. Simple sketch “Feet Live Their Own Life.” According to Bakhtin, this is the laughter of “the awakened man who has attained virility” (67).

7. Gaines has said, “I think, in much black folklore and blues, that even when things are at their worst, there’s often something humorous that comes through. . . . My characters are not usually 100 percent bitter, not hardened to the point that they cannot feel and give and change. Humor and joking are part of change” (Gaudet and Wooton 22).

8. The image of the bear, repeated four times on 207–9, is part of the large and ancient mythic tradition drawn upon also by William Faulkner in “The Bear” and by Ralph Ellison in his evocations of Brer Bear of African-American folklore in Invisible Man. The presence of the children here has a carnivalesque element: it emphasizes that the old world is dying and the youthful, new time is being generated out of death (Bakhtin 211). Contrast Cherry’s tale of white men killing the “big pretty mulatto” girl on Mardi Gras Day, 1947 (45).