2. For discussions of the depiction of ministers in "The Sky Is Gray" and other short stories, see Gaudet, "Failure."

3. See my discussion of this narrative inversion in *The Character of the Word*, especially chapter four.

4. Babb does engage in some discussion that calls women's positionality in this story into question. (See, for example, 108–10.) However, like Gaines, she uses women characters to give the reader further insight into Martin's psyche. For example, Babb writes that what she considers as Adeline's "innocuous duplicity" serves to magnify "the more tragic consequences of his own" (108) and that his wife's promise to him is a directive of what he "must do" to reinflate his "diminished presence" (110), not an ironic pronouncement of what he has been incapable of accomplishing. This tendency toward reviewing the presence of women in terms of their serviceability and posture in reference to the male characters is one worthy of more critical attention as it seems to appear not only in Gaines's craft but in the critic's response as well.
Strong Men Getting Stronger:  
Gaines’s Defense of the Elderly Black Male in *A Gathering of Old Men*

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During the months immediately following the publication of Ernest J. Gaines’s highly acclaimed *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, he found himself having to convince the media that his protagonist—a 110-year-old ex-slave—did not exist. He also confessed to an audience at Southern University that he had “not interviewed my grandmother or my aunt who raised me when I lived in the South” (“Miss Jane and I” 23). While the accusations that prompted such declarations may have tried Gaines’s patience to some degree, more importantly, his responses reflect his determination to avoid reliance upon stereotype. In its place he substitutes three-dimensional elderly blacks endowed with compassion, conscience, and intelligence.

Old black men and women are interspersed throughout Gaines’s fiction in varying roles, ranging from the strong and silent to the weak and quick-tongued. Just as some may be sycophants for “old massah,” others are militants prepared to die. They are not all admirable, nor are they limited to degrading stereotypes. The wide range of his characters shows Gaines’s tendency to incorporate into his work black personality types previously avoided by other authors. Because of his tendency to convert into central figures characters that might otherwise seem minor, Gaines has developed a reputation for giving voice and significance to the least likely individuals—those who are too quickly viewed as irrelevant, apa-
thetic, or simply undeserving of recognition. In the Louisiana locales serving as settings for his fiction, old black people become Gaines's new breed of heroes.

The inclusion of elderly blacks in Gaines's fiction coincides with a much improved public image of older people in America. Moreover, his sensitive treatment of the elderly seems to mirror the positive results of recent research among leading gerontologists. Both the novelist and the social scientist realize that the second-class status of America's elderly is perpetuated by myths and misconceptions that have for too long remained unchallenged. For example, Robert N. Butler's *Why Survive? Being Old in America* analyzes disturbingly naive stereotypes that embody characteristics many believe to be actual symptoms of old age. Butler contends that the average person views aging as "little more than decline, with no redeeming personal or social value. Old age has become an absurdity, a time of life with virtually nothing to recommend it" (403). O. Z. White identifies an often mistaken perception among the younger population that the elderly are powerless. This, he notes, is the chief reason for discrimination against them. He explains that the elderly "are considered to be recipients rather than participants. The statuses they presently hold and the ill-defined roles they play are not significant to the production or decision-making process" (4). In large part because of pressure in recent years to reassess the elderly's role in society, these and similar myths have been brought into question and dispelled. Now, commanding renewed respect, the elderly enjoy vibrant new roles in reality as well as in fiction. They have evolved from the fatalistic stereotypes depicted in works such as Arna Bontemps's "A Summer's Tragedy" and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to latter-day militants in Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* and *Miss Jane Pittman*.

As indicated by the current elderly population in the United States, unprecedented in size, and its growing political clout, the elderly demand a new and better image than the images Butler and White document. No longer are older Americans limited to traditional images associating lethargy with growing old. Instead, the present mission of gerontologists such as Butler and White and writers such as Gaines is to promote a healthier and more realistic view of the elderly.

Elderly blacks appear in limited numbers and often in fairly minor roles in Gaines's body of fiction. One work, however, demonstrates a
major shift in his depiction of the elderly black male. *A Gathering* is a decided departure from his previous works in which defiance is either a coincidence or a selfish choice for black men, old or young. Furthermore, it portrays a degree of camaraderie among men of similar age not found in his other works. The concentrated energy resulting from the combined protests of old black men and its effect in heightening the novel’s conflict further distinguish the work from Gaines’s previous fiction. Moreover, the collaboration among the old black men of *A Gathering* seems to point to a culmination of Gaines’s quest to fuse black consciousness with black solidarity. He appears to suggest that success at effecting change is inseparably bound with discovering the special advantages of group strength. In this regard, the novel posits a challenging reappraisal of old black men.

In *Miss Jane Pittman* Gaines depicts, rather than the stereotypical shuffling, humming, heaven-bound elderly black, an alert and active force with whom the opposition must reckon. But the similarities between *Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Gathering* do not extend beyond the obvious parallels in the ages and charisma of their elderly characters. Even though Jane Pittman, Charlie, Mathu, and the group of old black men are alike in their refusal to conform to roles regularly assigned to elderly blacks, a variety of inhibiting gender ethics enforced by land-owning Southern whites to assure their continued control of the blacks significantly limits any further comparisons. The heroics of Jane Pittman and the collaboration among the old black men in *A Gathering* must be judged according to two separate standards of behavior tolerated by land-hungry Cajun farmers—one for elderly black women and another for elderly black men. The women are more likely to be respected, tolerated, and ultimately provided for in their old age. Older black men, at the same time, exist as weary shadows, agreeing with or ignoring their oppressors often as a concession to save their very lives. For Gaines’s older black men, psychological emasculation is the option between exile or an early death. Seldom seriously challenged, defiant older black women in Gaines’s fiction noticeably differ from older black men, who, because of their doubly oppressive circumstances, often appear to be mere cowards.

By virtue of age and gender, Jane Pittman transcends the dehumanizing behavior that her male counterparts endure. Although her life has been punctuated by episodes of personal horror, her narrative recalls relatively few potentially fatal occasions when she has challenged
whites. Even while traveling alone with the orphaned toddler Ned in tow—begging for water, for directions to Ohio, for a ride on a ferry, or for a place to sleep—she manages to reap compassion from otherwise vicious whites. A young black girl and a small child making their way all alone from Louisiana to Ohio and an old woman, once a slave, walking to an all-white fountain for a symbolic drink pose far less danger than a group of frustrated old black men carrying weapons.

As Jane Pittman ages, she elicits concern rather than scorn from her master. Eventually she is no longer required to work in the fields and is “brought up to the big house” as cook. Here she works on her own terms, showing feisty disregard for any authority Miss Ama and Robert try to impose upon her: “I told him at my age I did what I wanted to do” (201). Not only is she shielded from backbreaking toil in the fields, but she is also able to choose her own living quarters. She even persuades Miss Ama to provide help in fixing up the place.

For the major part of her life, therefore, Jane Pittman manages to preserve at least a facsimile of her pride. When she participates in the rally to drink at the all-white water fountain in Bayonne, she does so with the protective immunity afforded by her status as a respected 110-year-old. She is not exposed to the rash verbal and physical abuse that her younger comrades and the old men of *A Gathering* have learned to expect from white antagonists. The young are the preferred targets of die-hard white racists; they pose the greater long-term threat to the status quo. Old black men likewise pose a threat to Louisiana whites, but these are threats to reverse a legacy of symbolic emasculation. Jane Pittman, on the other hand, poses no apparent danger in the eyes of whites. Although her courage in accompanying the entourage of black youths to Bayonne is admirable, her sacrifice is meager by comparison, when one considers the aggravation endured by other blacks who both literally and physically fight oppression.

Despite the fact that Gaines’s older female characters seem distanced from verbal and physical abuse, they are nonetheless frequently tormented by divided consciences. While not entirely oblivious to the sufferings of other blacks, they must exist in tense environments where they are obliged to feign ignorance of various crimes. In some instances, their decisions to remain loyal to whites compromise and demean them. Thus they cannot in good faith completely enjoy their protected status without at least some degree of guilt.
Miss Amalia of the short story “Bloodline” is cursed by such a tormenting ambivalence. On one hand, as the black housekeeper, she is concerned for the poor health of her white boss, Frank Laurent, the last white heir to the Laurent property; on the other, as the aunt of the belligerent mulatto Copper (also known as General Christian Laurent), who returns to claim his birthright as a Laurent, she is painfully aware of his reasons for discontent. Son of the white plantation owner who raped Miss Amalia’s sister, Copper challenges the Laurent family law that says, “Your mon was black and you can’t claim a damn thing” (206). But understanding Copper is all that Miss Amalia can do. She can offer no more than her tears when she tries to stop the inevitable confrontation between him and the last remaining white heir.

“Don’t go down there [to the quarters], Mr. Frank,” Malia said. “Please, don’t do down there.”
“Must go, Amalia,” Frank said. “I can’t let Copper in here [his own house].”
“And your heart?” she said. She was crying; the water had run down her face to her chin.
Frank stood there looking down at her.
“Poor Amalia,” he said. “We all hurt you, don’t we, Amalia?” (199–200)

Similarly, Aunt Margaret in the novel Of Love and Dust has to endure an extremely awkward ordeal. She must pretend to ignore the frequent lovemaking sessions of the conniving Marcus Payne and his Cajun overseer’s wife Louise. Caught between her loyalty to Sidney Bonbon’s family and her strong disapproval of Marcus and his method of seeking revenge on the overseer, Aunt Margaret must suppress her frustration: “It won’t end good,” she thought. . . . He go’npay, she go’npay, both of them go’npay for this day.” (162)

Jane Pittman also experiences an awkward dilemma. She is proud of her self-proclaimed son Ned, who becomes an agent of black resistance. Yet she befriends the Cajun who ultimately shoots him. She faints from the shock of learning the white vigilantes have charged Albert Cluveau to kill all black opposition, including her Ned:

I looked at Albert Cluveau a moment, then I felt my head spinning. I made one step toward the house, then I was down on the ground. I heard somebody way off saying, “Jane, Jane, what’s the matter, Jane?” I opened my eyes and I saw Albert Cluveau with his ugly face kneeling over me. And I
thought I was in hell, and he was the devil. I started screaming: “Get away from me, devil. Get away from me, devil. Get away from me, devil.” But all my screaming was inside, and not a sound was coming out. (105–6)

She is helpless. She knows that Ned will not end his crusade for freedom. She knows his death is imminent, and she knows at whose hands he will die. As evidenced by the predicaments of Jane Pittman, Aunt Margaret, and Miss Amalia, although peace and security are often within reach, these rewards are often either elusive or conditional—subject to many compromises and much suffering.

In *A Gathering*, female support is also conditional as well as slow in coming. At first, several elderly black women oppose their husbands’ uncharacteristic bravery. Like Mapes and other witnesses, they have to be convinced gradually by the spectacle the elderly group creates with its show of force. The women are clearly distanced from their men in terms of the degree to which they consider the confrontation to be worth the risk of physical harm. The extreme shift from years of inactivity to total involvement causes a debate within one of the black families: Mat cannot sneak past his wife Ella with his twelve-gauge shotgun without an emotion-charged speech explaining why he must go to Mathu’s house: “All these years we been living together, woman, you still don’t know what’s the matter with me? The years we done struggled in George Medlow’s field, making him richer and richer and us getting poorer and poorer—and you still don’t know what’s the matter with me?” (37–38). Ella is clearly moved by Mat’s words, but the fact that she does not, at first, intuit his motives after having been married to him for so long suggests naïveté bordering upon blindness. Chimley meets similar resistance from his wife, who not only protests “cleaning fishes this time of day” (32) but also questions his sanity after he shoots his twelve-gauge out the window. With guarded humor and not nearly so much emotion as Mat, Chimley clears the way for his departure: “If I come back from Marshall and them fishes ain’t done and ready for me to eat, I’m go’n do me some more shooting around this house” (33). The women’s shock at their husbands’ willingness to participate in an open rebellion reveals how even they do not understand the extent to which these old black men have born their hurt. The men’s actions at the graves of loved ones, in front of Mathu’s house, and in their own homes dispel any notions that Mat, Chimley, or any of their group have been cowards all of their
lives or that they simply did not care about the way they were treated. Gaines’s characters show their revolutionary nature by reacting to the death of the central character on the very day it occurs. Moreover, other participants in the symbolic coup do not dally before deciding on their course of action. Events occur in such rapid succession that Gaines manages to move quickly from the initial shooting scene to the congregation of the old men at Mathu’s house. Though there are several brief scenes of deliberation between the old men and their wives and each other, these conversations are but brief interludes before they resume their mission.

Age, tenure, and quality of service mean little to the Boutan family and other whites who keep both young and old black men in a state of subservience by threatening them with violence or exile at the slightest hint of revolt. Beau Boutan enforces his family’s martial law in order to maintain control over Charlie and other elderly black men by frequently intimidating, cursing, and beating them. Unlike Jane Pittman, the old black men are not immune to beatings because of their age or any special grace shown them by white landowners. According to Charlie’s account, “I told him [Beau] he didn’t need to cuss me like that. I told him I was doing my work good. He told me he wouldn’t just cuss me, but he would beat me, too. I told him no, I wasn’t go’n ’low that no more, ’cause I was fifty years old—half a hundred. He told me if I said one more word, he was go’n show me how he treated a half-a-hundred-year-old nigger” (190).

In Of Love and Dust, Bonbon, whose task is to harass the antagonist Marcus Payne, follows a similar set of rules for handling blacks. The novel’s black narrator Jim Kelly describes the overseer as “brutal because he had been brought up in a brute-taught world and in brute-taught times. The big house had given him a horse and a whip... and they had told him to ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could (67).

In “Bloodline,” Frank Laurent, the last white heir to the Laurent property, is just as faithful in executing traditional family laws as are Boutan and Bonbon. The legacy of sanctioned violence against blacks is so much a part of his life that he claims to have no alternative but to adhere to “rules” that have long preceded him. In an unusual display of emotion, he explains to his black help, Felix and Aunt Amalia, why he insists that his mulatto nephew Copper must come through the back door before they can talk: “‘What am I supposed to do?’ he said, when he
couldn’t hold back any more. ‘Change the rules? Do you know how old these rules are? They’re older than me, than you, than this entire place. I didn’t make them, I came and found them here. And I—an invalid—am I supposed to change them all?’” (188). In such rare moments as this, when his emotions and good judgment creep to the surface and expose his compassion, Frank Laurent quickly regains his constitution by citing tradition.

Although whipping is one of the most belittling forms of punishment executed against black men, perhaps an even more pathetic, though less obvious, form of torture is debilitating mental abuse. Having to exist with constant reminders of helplessness, old black men—from Bishop in Of Love and Dust to Mathu in A Gathering—exhibit extreme types of behavior. They become either cowards or the sole defenders against white oppression. As two noted gerontologists assert, “The impact of stress upon the aged is often greater than upon the young since the elderly as a group usually possess fewer personal resources for coping effectively with stressful circumstances. Old age is the first stage of life that brings systematic status-loss for an entire generation” (Varghese and Medinger 97). In Gaines’s fiction, elderly black men who choose to survive, in spite of ever-present reminders of their shifting status as well as the threat of exile or death, must inevitably adopt a variety of defense mechanisms. They either convince themselves that they are among the select few to receive favors from the Cajuns and therefore become oblivious to rampant violations of their people, or they challenge their Cajun oppressors head-on in frequently futile attempts to preserve their land and their pride.

While holding onto flimsy promises of security in their old age (which, in many cases, amount to merely the assurance of a place to die and be buried), some old black men in Gaines’s fiction appear to shuffle along as if hypnotized, not questioning or challenging their plight. The epitome of this character type appears in Of Love and Dust. The pathetic old black servant Bishop has throughout life been obsessively loyal to the white landowner Marshall Hebert. Although he is not subjected to beatings, Bishop is no more than an expendable commodity. Like the old men in early episodes of A Gathering, he abides by an unwritten agreement devised and enforced by rich white landowners: if you work hard, don’t cause trouble, and remain loyal, you will be allowed to remain on the land until death. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Bishop
frantically pleads with the belligerent Marcus Payne not to jeopardize what he thinks will be a long and peaceful retirement at Hebert's home place. He has grown old there and has served Marshall Hebert with unquestionable loyalty for the major part of his life, yet in one evening he becomes an outcast:

"No sir," he said.
"No sir," he said. Then he started babbling off at the mouth. "Your people say I can stay here. Your people liked me. They say long as I was a good boy I could stay here. They say if I looked after y'all and I was a good boy, this house was my home till I died. They say that room there 'side that dining room—"

"Didn't I tell you to get out," Marshall said, coming on him. (236)

Felix, the seventy-year-old narrator of "Bloodline," similarly believes that the years of service to his white employer ought to merit special favors for him. Like Bishop, at first he seems confident that he is better than other blacks who do not have a certain understanding with their white employers. He brags about the special relationship he and Miss Amalia enjoy not only as friends but also as confidantes to the wealthy Frank Laurent: "Me and 'Malia had been there almost long as Frank had been there, and he told us more than he ever told anybody else. And that's why he never scared me. I obeyed his orders because I respected him; not because I was scared of him" (166). Nevertheless, Felix's supposedly warm relationship with Frank Laurent does not prevent him from being regarded as mere chattel. When the two elderly men discuss strategies for negotiating with the young "whipper-snapper" Copper, they are comrades; yet when matters of authority and control are in question, their relationship quickly polarizes. Frank Laurent becomes the unquestionable voice of authority, and Felix becomes just another old, insignificant black man. At such times, Frank Laurent is quick to remind Felix of their true relationship in vicious verbal attacks: "You start toward that door, Felix, so help me God I'll get that gun out of that desk drawer and shoot your goddamn head off" (188). As Felix struggles to find reasons to excuse the demeaning way Frank Laurent treats him, he becomes more and more insignificant to the work's central conflict. His passive role relegates him to the background as merely "the
innocent eye”—the narrator who comments upon the conflict around him but does not alter its course.

Like Felix, the elderly black men in *A Gathering* must contend with taunts and insults from antagonists who see them not as proud humans but as clowns. Hence, their actions are, at first, perceived by their wives and the citizens of Bayonne and the Marshall plantation as a farce. Robert Butler notes the typicality of such reactions toward the elderly: “Negative attitudes toward the old range from pity and infantilization to avoidance or direct hostility. The old are forced into—and for the most part accept—a narrow definition of appropriate behavior, usually quiet and passive” (402). Indeed, both black and white residents have become so accustomed to the contagious passivity displayed by many of the old black men that any deviation from such behavior is seen as more of a confirmation of senility than of courage. Thus they are met with disbelief from those who claim to know them well. Their wives, of whom Clatoo’s is representative: “You old fool. Y’all gone crazy?” (36). Their minister: “Some of y’all live far as Silo, the old Mulatto Place, Bayonne—ten, twelve miles from here. Don’t y’all know Mapes go’n know half of y’all couldn’t be nowhere near this place when this happened? Y’all all gone plumb crazy” (56). The sheriff: “Isn’t it a little bit late for you to be getting militant around here?” (86). And Sully: “It was like looking into the *Twilight Zone*. Remember that old TV play *Twilight Zone*? You would be driving through this little out-of-the-way town, and suddenly you would come upon a scene that you knew shouldn’t be there—it was something like that” (117–18). To these doubters, the old black men are fools; to the sympathetic reader, their action is an eruption of an ailment that has festered for years.

In a recent study of Gaines, Valerie Babb notes that the character Lou Dimes depicts the old black men as “warriors of an absurd war, and their appearance leaves one wondering why these men had to fight in the first place” (130). To defenders of the status quo, the term *absurd* denotes militancy, radicalism, foolishness, and having lost one’s sense of place in society. It is a tempting label for those who are observers rather than participants. To such doubters (those who are not black, those who are not old, and those who do not actually participate in the standoff), the term is a quick dismissal of anything that challenges popular opinion. While *absurd* does not adequately describe the actions of the old black
Strong Men Getting Stronger

men, it does suggest refreshing nonconformity. When used to describe the energy used to challenge an historically racist society, the term becomes a positive and approving one rather than just another of the many indicators of dementia.

A Gathering not only invites the reader to examine heroism among old black men as compared to heroism in their female counterparts but also challenges an era in literary history in which depictions of black men suffer the numbing effects of negative stereotypes. By setting an older version of revolutionary black men in an explosive environment where racial tension rivals that of the revolutionary 1960s, Gaines seems to mock the virtual exclusion of the more aged generation of blacks from protest writings of the 1960s. His narrative suggests a revival of black consciousness prompted not by youthful advocates of the urban-based black arts movement but by the last-ditch efforts of men in the twilight of their lives.

As a protest novel, A Gathering challenges the legacy of violence endured by small-town black residents of southern Louisiana. It protests the increasing loss of their land to the Cajuns, threats to their cemeteries, and both the blatant and the disguised forms of racial oppression demonstrated against them by white bigots and their more liberal yet misguided white allies. Just as importantly, it protests the much-maligned image of old black men as nonparticipants in the quest for racial justice.

Black artists from the 1960s such as Amiri Baraka, Don Lee, and Maulana Karenga have targeted the eighteen- to thirty-five-year-old audience, and a large portion of the country’s older population seems to have been deemed irrelevant to the revolution of that decade. This apparent, perhaps sometimes inadvertent, age bias seems to confirm what gerontologists Varghese and Medinger note in their research on fatalism among the minority aged: “[Aged] blacks and members of other minorities have lived most of their lives in the pre-civil rights era and therefore have not enjoyed the full benefit of the widening social and economic opportunities that have resulted from recent Civil Rights legislation” (104). However, in Gaines’s hands, stereotypical roles such as the “bible-toting” preacher or Uncle Tom give way to roles that thrust old men into the forefront—demanding rather than acquiescing. Within the context of Gaines’s novel, Baraka’s plea to a generation of youthful recruits in the popular treatise “The Revolutionary Theatre” might be
read to assume a new relevance: "And what we show must cause the
blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in
this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will
find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul
has been taught" (Home 213). Both fictional and nonfictional accounts
of the civil rights movement of the 1960s would have us believe that
the typical freedom fighter was a young, aggressive black male. In "Ala-
Bama Centennial," 1960s poet Naomi Madgett expresses the generally
held misconception that only the young black male is fit to represent
blacks' struggle for freedom:

Not all the dogs and hoses in Birmingham
Nor all the clubs and guns in Selma
Can turn this tide.
Not all the jails can hold these young black faces
From their destiny of manhood,
Of equality, of dignity,
Of the American Dream
A hundred years past due.
Now! (198)

Gaines begins to shatter myths of age and gender in his lively por-
trayal of Miss Jane Pittman. In A Gathering he continues to contradict
the stereotypical image of revolutionaries as exclusively angry young
men. His novel also rebuts the general notion that elderly black men
have relinquished their role as defenders of civil rights to the young be-
cause of fear or apathy. Babb underscores the impact of the old men's
revolt:

Their collective confession has purged them of the impotent rage they have
nurtured against the plantation system, but more importantly it has purged
them of the self-loathing they have harbored for the majority of their lives.
Through the telling of their stories, through the emotional truth of their
symbolic if not actual killing of Beau Boutan, they confront their past and
restructure their present and future. (131)

The sharecropper Mathu, more than seventy years old, is the primary
example of the old black rebel whom Gaines offers as a contradiction
to the more youthful stereotype. He is what Babb refers to as "a symbol
for change because he is a repository of both the black and white pasts"
(121). He has earned respect from his peers and from the whites around
Marshall plantation, particularly Sheriff Mapes, who considers him “a better man than most I’ve met, black and white” (74). Even though he is admired by his old comrades and by certain whites, he is humble in his realization that he cannot accept the label hero, for up to this moment he has been consumed by a bitter hatred for the very men who now idolize him: “‘I ain’t nothing but a mean, bitter old man,’ he said. ‘No hero. Lord—no hero. A mean, bitter old man. Hating them out there on that river, hating y’all here in the quarters. Put myself above all—proud to be African. You know why proud to be African? ‘Cause they won’t let me be a citizen here in this country. Hate them ’cause they won’t let me be a citizen, hated y’all ’cause you never tried. Just a mean-hearted old man. All I ever been, till this hour’” (182).

A Gathering mirrors an aspect of the revolutionary conflict of the 1960s in its depiction of Candy. She is the embodiment of the well-meaning but ineffectual white liberal who, though essentially benevolent, is in fact a deterrent to the cause of freedom. Revolutionary zealots of that era were keenly aware of the problem posed by an alliance with white liberals. Yet during the civil rights movement, numerous whites marched hand-in-hand with blacks and shared their struggle for economic and political freedom. The decision of blacks to cut ties with such whites often came as the result of a political backlash that focused on some of the most avid black advocates of civil rights. In order to be totally effective, political activists such as Eldridge Cleaver and Baraka went through agonizing dilemmas involving drawing away from white influence. Candy confuses her love for Mathu, who raised her from childhood, with a need to “protect him.” When, in her innocence, she paradoxically implies that the old men cannot take charge of their own lives, even Mapes realizes that she has gone too far:

“You’ve been trying to split us up all day,” she said.
“And you want to keep them slaves the rest of their lives,” Mapes said back.
“Nobody is a slave here,” Candy said. “I’m protecting them like I’ve always protected them. Like my people have always protected them. Ask them.” (174)

The climactic episode marking the conversion of each of the old warriors from manchild to revolutionary is their disavowal of Candy. Although Gaines allows Candy to think that she is in control for much
of the novel, eventually the old men sever ties with her and become totally autonomous. At this point their metamorphosis is complete: they confer among themselves; they make decisions; they act as a unit; they are confident and unafraid of the fate awaiting them.

But Candy does not relinquish her role as guardian easily. She is, at first, the savior of the old men, ready to sacrifice her own reputation in order to defy any law that is unjust to them. As the group defines itself and gains strength, however, the men change their regard for her. Although their metamorphosis takes place right before her, Candy is stubbornly oblivious to the extent of their reversal of feelings. When she is faced with opposition from the group, her supposed loyalty to Mathu and to the other black families of the area turns to belligerence. She goes from being at the head of their ranks as their sole white defender to being excluded as a frightening reflection of the very same racism that Beau Boutan and his family represent.

Much like the precarious relationship between black and white comrades of the civil rights movement, the relationship between Candy and Mathu is one not easily explained. Candy’s compulsion to take the blame for Mathu is not simply a manifestation of love for her father figure. Her feelings represent a symbolic emasculation masquerading as protective-ness—what Mary T. Harper calls “the child-protector syndrome, with the thirty-year-old plantation mistress paternalistically and benevolently caring for her seventy-plus-year-old men children” (300). Therefore, as Gaines’s characters conquer other obstacles to physical and mental freedom, it becomes imperative that they not spare even Candy:

“Y’all come on inside,” Clatoo said to us. “Not you, Candy,” he said to her.

“Nobody’s talking without me,” Candy said, coming back toward the garry.

“This time we have to, Candy,” Clatoo said. “Just the men with guns.”

“Like hell,” Candy said. “This is my place.”

“I know that, Candy,” Clatoo said. “But we don’t want you there this time.” (173)

Through Candy, Gaines recalls similar love-hate relationships between the white female and the black male in previous literature (Ella Downey and Jim Harris in Eugene O’Neill’s All God’s Chillun Got Wings; Mary Dalton and Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native
Son; Lula and Clay in Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*). Out of either curiosity or a need to relieve their consciences of guilt they may feel for their race’s treatment of blacks, these liberal white females enter into relationships with black men in which they behave in an overbearing manner. Yet, despite a similar love-hate relationship between Gaines’s old men and their self-appointed guardian, they break Candy’s protective hold and move one step closer to an affirmation of self. Through the symbolic exorcism of Candy’s protective influence, Gaines gradually peels away various images of oppression. What remains is a newly tapped reservoir of strength that is potent enough to ensure that any changes effected by the group will remain in place for posterity.

For years the old black men who inhabit the Louisiana depicted in *A Gathering* sought temporary relief from their oppression by merely bemoaning their fates rather than actively seeking to change them. They unanimously attributed their despair to the Cajuns’ greed for land and insensitivity to blacks, yet none of them has been willing to stage any sort of organized counterattack—individual, group, or otherwise—against the Cajuns’ aggressive tactics. Medinger and Varghese describe similar thinking among the elderly who internalize their struggles. These scholars agree that repressed anxiety toward oppression among the elderly is “justified, instead of being simply a ‘cop-out.’” They further contend that “[by] shifting blame for failure and low status onto forces outside of themselves, stigmatized people, including the minority aged, can relieve themselves of some of the self-recrimination that would otherwise follow their unsuccessful attempts to improve their position” (108). In *A Gathering*, Gaines depicts all the necessary ingredients by which society perpetuates the stereotype of elderly complacency and “system-blaming,” but he also shows the abrupt reversal of such thinking.

The makeshift memorial service at the graves of the aged men’s victimized relatives represents what is perhaps the second phase in a series of marked changes in the men’s characters. This tribute to their dead becomes apocalyptic in its foreshadowing of the group’s potential for retaliation. As they recall incidents of past cowardice, the reader understands the extent of the personal debts they owe their relatives for years of silence. By reminding the reader of the mutual sufferings of these men, Gaines prepares for the climax of their metamorphosis at Mathu’s house.

The graveyard scene is important not only in suggesting that each of
these men has a motive for shooting Beau Boutan but also in providing an opportunity for Gaines to examine the characters as individuals. Each has had a history of complacency. Each has been afraid to defend a family member’s life or honor. Each has had to decide whether to die a hero or live and adopt means to cope with his resulting mental anguish. So that the reader may see the men as individuals, Gaines significantly slows down the pace of the novel when Candy’s hastily appointed deputies meet near the cemetery while awaiting several of their other aged friends to join them.

The visits to their relatives’ burial plots creates within the men a type of bravery that transcends concern for their own safety and that seems necessary for them to have if they are to redress a legacy of blatant crimes by Fix, his vigilantes, and other such villains. The black men’s unrealized need to retaliate remained suppressed for years because of aging bodies and dulled egos, yet now a fighting spirit is aroused in them. Suddenly independent from Candy, they fuel their mission by galvanizing the repressed anger stemming from the rape of their land and the persecution of their people.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the conversion from the man-child to revolutionary hero is Clatoo. During the course of the novel he is transformed from a passive observer to an active participant in changing the course of his people’s lives. At first he spends his days with his friend Mat at some quiet fishing site. Both men are characterized by the messenger boy Fue, whom Clatoo considers “sissy-looking” and who, in turn, feels they are unlikely to have been anybody’s murderer: “Y’all can go and do like she [Candy] say at y’all can go home, lock y’all doors, and crawl under the bed like y’all used to” (28). This snide remark from the child merely echoes community sentiments.

Clatoo must not only shed his lethargic image but also exorcise his gnawing sense of being indirectly responsible for a family member’s humiliation and insanity. When Myrtle Bouchard forces Janey and Bea to name persons with possible motives for killing Beau, Clatoo’s name comes to mind first: She “[tries] to remember what Fix had done to Clatoo” yet concludes that it “was not Fix, it was that crazy brother of his, Forest Boutan, who had tried to rape one of Clatoo’s sisters. She had defended herself by chopping him half dozen times with a cane knife. She didn’t kill him, but he was well marked for the rest of his days. And she was sent to the pen for the rest of hers, where after so many
years she died insane” (25). That Fix’s brother is responsible for killing Clatoo’s sister is not the elderly black man’s major concern, however. Clatoo recognizes the more serious, universal problem. The enemy are all of Fix’s kind who have abused them or their families.

Clatoo becomes the reincarnation of the revolutionary hero. Facing certain abuse and possible death, he opts to accept his fate. Thus he emerges as the unproclaimed leader of this revolt that marks the beginning of an era in which old black men will, as Amiri Baraka demands in “Poem for Black Hearts,” “look up / black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up, / quit whining and stooping” (Selected Poetry 104). Clatoo becomes the organizer, the coach, the spokesman of the group. He encourages all of the men to shoot their guns at least once so that each gun may be regarded as the actual weapon that was used to kill Beau; he transports the group to the designated rendezvous in his truck; he even gives them a last-minute pep talk before proceeding to Mathu’s house. Once there, he continues to coordinate the protest and even surprises Sheriff Mapes with his new defiance. He heckles Mapes from the crowd yet refuses to flinch when recognized, adding, “I’m old…. About time I had li’l trouble with the law before I died” (86).

Also featured in Gaines’s character portrayals of members of this motley group are Uncle Billy, Gable, Tucker, and Johnny Paul. Although several of these octogenarians come from surrounding areas and have never before fraternized, they seem comfortable in the group. They bond instantly, overlooking the now inconsequential differences and shallow concerns of the past such as their complexions or their family name. They listen attentively and respectfully to each of the testimonies.

Uncle Billy is perhaps the oldest of the group and possibly the one with the most pathetic tale about Fix’s cruelty to his family. Even as an elderly man, he recalls vividly his son’s brutal beating: “They beat him till they beat him crazy, and we had to send him to Jackson. He don’t even know me and his mama no more. We take him candy, we take him cake, he eat it like a hog eating corn…. His mama slice him a little piece and hand it to him, he let it fall on the table, and eat it like a hog eating corn” (80). Uncle Billy does not seem to mind that Mapes’s deputy chooses him as the first of the elderly men to be interrogated, nor does he lose faith when Mapes smacks him. Despite Mapes’s threats that he could die in the electric chair, the old man is not intimidated. Even after he fails miserably to prove that he is capable of aiming—much less
shooting—his twelve-gauge shotgun, he backs away still echoing, “But I did it” (82).

Rivaling Uncle Billy’s story of grossly inhumane treatment by whites is that of Gable. Despite his wife’s warnings about his weak heart, he manages to testify about his mentally retarded son’s torturous death by electrocution. Falsely accused of rape by a promiscuous young white girl, Gable’s son was sentenced to die in a faulty electric chair. After failing to kill him on the first try, the white attendants kicked and tinkered with the machine until it finally worked. Gable is ashamed to have endured the horror of his son’s death for so many years without retribution, and he senses that he has been given an opportunity to atone for his cowardice. Driven by his awareness of the imminence of his own death, he summons more than enough courage to avenge his son’s death publicly and set things right within his own mind. His confession is accompanied by a bittersweet sense of relief.

As each of the elderly men’s confessions reveals, old age heightens the sense of urgency. Old age has similarly increased their concern about the aggressive efforts of certain Cajun farmers to expand their landholdings at the expense of black families. Outrage over such ruthless encroachment brings both Tucker and Johnny Paul to the rendezvous at Mathu’s house. Both know that even the graves they stop to survey en route to Mathu’s are in jeopardy of being plowed under by wealthy Cajun farmers seeking more land to plant.

Their land possesses romantic as well as historical significance. Tucker and Johnny Paul are painfully aware of the hard labor that their ancestors put into land that is destined to be overtaken soon. Moved to lyrical sadness, these men voice opposition to the voracious Cajun plows. Tucker is deeply saddened when he remembers how his brother Silas was beaten to death for winning a contest that pitted his own two mules against a tractor. Helpless and frightened, Tucker could only stand by and watch the Cajuns “beat my brother down to the ground” (97). Johnny Paul voices his bitterness over the loss of the pastoral serenity that his ancestors once found on the land. Gone are the formerly vibrant little huts warmed with low chatter from front porches and the communal goodwill that existed despite their occupants’ hard lives. In their place is a glaring vacuum of open space—land flattened by the tractor’s plow. The ruthless aggression that destroyed his people’s homes is the reason Johnny Paul offers for killing Beau: “I did it for them back there..."
under them trees. I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was” (92).

Associated with a dwindling relationship between the Louisiana blacks of *A Gathering* and their land is a haunting sense of annihilation of the black man's cultural past. Like the American Indian, whose dwindling habitat led him to the cramped quarters of the reservation, these blacks resent the callous disregard for their past as well as their future. Both Tucker and Johnny Paul realize that the chances are slim that such a small group as theirs could make an effective protest, yet what other generation could be more suitable for calling attention to the plight of their people? Age and experience have endowed Tucker, Johnny Paul, and their comrades with the special ability to forge a link between an oppressed past and a promising future.

Gaines's novel depicts more than just a gathering of old men. He surpasses the impersonal connotations of the novel's title in his own delicate treatment of each character. He makes these men into more than examples of herd mentality, more than attention-seekers eager to share the limelight of the occasion. In addition to dispelling any notion of cowardice among these characters, Gaines shows that they are indeed conscientious men who display profound ties with the land, their communities, their families, and their ancestors. Although they gather to rally in Mathu’s defense, their separate confessions reveal individuals suddenly awakening from the sleep of despair, fear, and ignorance of their own potential. Despite the many forces preventing unification of the black race, individual efforts have historically been the catalysts for great movements. By focusing on these individual heroes in *A Gathering*, Gaines draws attention to the possibility for effective group action.

Sterling Brown captures in his poem "Strong Men" the essence of such elderly black men as those in *A Gathering*. The men to whom Brown pays homage have learned to cope with insurmountable oppression by acknowledging it yet not succumbing to it. Fully aware of the weight of their burdens, they move steadily forward:

*What, from the slums
Where they have hemmed you
What, from the tiny huts*
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).¹ *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.*² *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