(Re)Claiming Legacy in the Post-Civil Rights South in Richard Wright’s “Down by the Riverside” and Ernest Gaines’s A Gathering of Old Men 

by Terrence Tucker

In Mark Arax’s 2004 Los Angeles Times article “In a Reverse Migration, Blacks Head South,” he informs us that the urban northern and western destinations of African Americans from 1910 to 1970, what we refer to as The Great Migrations, have been undergoing a “full scale reversal” as African Americans began “retracing steps to a place their families once fled—the South” (A1). The spike in the southern black population—an increase of 3.6 million during the 1990s—coincided with the changing ethnic demographics in areas to which African Americans traditionally moved in opposition to the Jim Crow South. Therefore, with the appearance of cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Memphis as black “Meccas,” as DeWayne Wickham points out, “the South has emerged as the leading source of economic opportunity for black businesses and fertile ground for black politicians” (A13). The realignment that the Civil Rights Movement engineered resulted in a southern transformation that could not overtly and legally deny the rights and humanity of African Americans. Yet in a landscape that maintains a deep connection to its traditions and legacy, African Americans still find themselves, at times, erased from the mythic construction of the South and marginalized in material areas of social and political power. In addition to its role in the

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conservative counterrevolution of the 1980s and 1990s, a litany of recent events in the South—specifically the dragging death of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, the punitive indictments of six African American boys in Jena, Louisiana, and the federal government’s belated response during Hurricane Katrina—have reinforced ideas of the South as a site in which African Americans still remain an incredibly vulnerable populace.

The depiction of the South as a dangerous (and at times nightmarish) space for African Americans has an extensive history in African American literature. Richard Wright’s 1938 collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, for example, depicts southern African Americans struggling to achieve agency in an unforgiving, violent Jim Crow South, a struggle buoyed by contemporaneous events like the trial of the Scottsboro boys and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Wright’s second story in the collection, “Down by the Riverside,” also points to the future by forecasting the pervasive instances of white supremacy that accompanied the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, from the governmental response to the mostly black poor to the media construction of black “looters” and “refugees.”

Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* presents a late 1970s South that directly contradicts the idea of a rapidly changing nation after the passage of the Voting and Civil Rights Acts in the 1960s. In Gaines’s novel, we are witness to a world that has barely changed from the world of the 1940s that Gaines captures in works like *Of Love and Dust* (1968) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). Wright and Gaines are part of a larger literary tradition that, as Anissa Wardi claims in *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature*, “bears witness to the truncated narratives of the Middle Passage, the brutal practices of slavery, and the paradoxical configuration of the South through myth and memory” (28). Instead of merely bearing witness, the African Americans in Gaines’s south Louisiana community assert a collective subjectivity that foreshadows the significance of black political, social, and economic life in rewriting the southern racial narrative and myth that has marginalized or erased the legacy of African Americans.

Jerry Ward claims that “in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the flooding of New Orleans, ‘Down by the Riverside’ speaks to much more than the Flood of 1927” (347). Similarly, the return of African Americans to the South leads us to view *A Gathering of Old Men* not only as the site of a final battle in the Civil Rights Movement, but as a potentially regenerative space for a more inclusive, restructured South. Through the lens Ward provides we can anticipate the ways in which the South’s post-integration image will become more complex as certain
forces attempt to maintain the tradition of marginalizing African Americans and African Americans continue to assert increasing influence. This paper argues that the works of Wright and Gaines forecast the transformation necessary in confronting and transcending the challenges of the New South in the twenty-first century.

**Here Come the Floods: “Down by the Riverside” and Unnatural Disasters**

For the purposes of this essay, I focus on Wright’s characters’ direct response to traditional stereotypes and their complex relationship to the land that has the potential to embody racist oppression or to reflect the assertion of black subjectivity. In particular, Wright’s initial works reveal a deep interest in the southern landscape, and white southern brutality, to which African Americans are often powerless to respond. It is a space to which Wright continually returns in his other works, from *Native Son* (1940) to *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) to *Black Boy* (1945). Although his indictment of the urban North had a significant impact for protest novels throughout the mid-twentieth century, especially in *Native Son*, Wright is specifically responding to the construction of the North as an escape from the horrors of the South. His construction of the South is virtually devoid of collective hope. Therefore, we cannot ignore the ways in which historical events impact our readings of Wright’s, and eventually Gaines’s, southern stories. Jerry Ward admits in “*Uncle Tom’s Children* Revisited” that he is “very conscious that a loosely constructed narrative of memory that includes the instance of [the Scottsboro boys trial] and the lynching of Emmett Till serves as a filter in my reading of Wright’s anti-pastoral” (347). Similarly, we must begin to consider how the current generation’s memories of Jasper, Jena, and Katrina inform our readings of Wright’s and Gaines’s renderings of a South determined to sustain its legacy of white racial privilege under the guise of pride and tradition. Wright portrays a southern black life under constant siege and whose search for agency is often met with extreme violence. If Wright is pessimistic at the possibility of transforming the power of southern myth and tradition, Wright still promotes a move towards self-actualization, generally expressed through rage. Often articulated through violence, the rage of Wright’s characters eventually leads to the beginnings of a clear critique of white supremacy. In particular, we see clear connections between the southern racial narrative and the southern landscape that Wright draws in his short story “Down by the Riverside.”
Although many cite “Big Boy Leaves Home” as Wright’s most well-constructed story, “Down by the Riverside” more completely utilizes the southern landscape as a physical manifestation of the racial, economic, and gendered forces at work in the lives of southern blacks. According to James Jaye, this second story “is the first to clearly establish the struggle between naturalistic forces and one’s free will” (433). The story of Brother Mann, an African American male who must get his pregnant wife Lulu and their family to safety in the midst of a flood, gives us a more sustained look at how African American rage can counteract the oppression of white supremacy. In a boat stolen from the white Heartfield family and rowing against the current of the flood with his child, his wife (who is in labor), and his mother-in-law, Mann realizes that he is caught in events that will almost certainly end in his death. Jaye believes that “just as Mann, the name obviously symbolic, must battle the raging current which threatens his life, so too must all humans battle the current of determinism which threatens to control their lives” (433). Mann’s choice to brave the current, and (if caught) death, for his family’s safety provides an image of African American heroism that is usually reserved for whites or African Americans who save whites. Similarly, the stories of African American heroism during Katrina were virtually lost under an avalanche of charges of looting, plasma TVs, and rape. The media coverage and the overall response to Katrina fed into what Michael Eric Dyson calls “a Southern racial narrative being performed before a national and global audience” (21). At the center of the narrative is the exploitation, co-option, and terrorizing of its African American population.

The determinist forces in Wright center on Jim Crow and the legacy of racist hierarchy, embedded in the land itself. As such, we must consider the point that Robert Felgar makes in his literary biography of Wright, that “the story is concerned with Southern blacks who face not only racial hatred but also hostile nature, for the hero, who is perhaps too obviously named Mann, must save his family from flood waters while simultaneously taking his fatally pregnant wife, Lulu, to the hospital” (67). Wright, of course, is generally concerned with determinism in his work, but he finds perhaps its most compelling manifestation in the hostility of the flood that operates as an extreme example of the land’s physical toll on African Americans that also includes slavery and sharecropping. As Mann and his family set out in the boat, section two of the story finds Mann surrounded by a land that is rife with dread: “To all sides of Mann the flood rustled, gurgled, droned, glistening blackly like an ocean of bubbling oil. Above his head the sky was streaked with faint
grey light. The air was warm humid, blowing fitful gusts. All around he was ringed in by walls of solid darkness” (74). For Mann, the land is filled with potential danger and could render everyone in the boat at the mercy of environmental forces. The reference conjures memories of Katrina survivors who, after enduring the ferocious power of the storm, faced an environment filled with withering heat and humidity and debris from the hurricane that might block them from reaching dry ground. To be sure, for Wright the clearest examples of oppressive forces that impose on African American subjectivity were whites, if not whiteness itself. As Felgar suggests, whiteness “is used persistently in Wright’s fiction as a symbol of danger, menace” (67). For some Katrina survivors, the connections of whiteness and menace were embodied by the predominantly white community members of Gretna who refused to allow any evacuees into their city and fired gunshots at survivors who attempted to cross the bridge that connected them to Gretna. Wright frequently turned conceptions of whiteness on their head, almost smothering Bigger Thomas in whiteness in *Native Son* and, in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, linking virtually every appearance with whites with some type of violence.

Thus there is a significant amount of resonance at work when Mann and his family come across the house of the Heartfields, and Mr. Heartfield demands his boat back, pointing a gun at the boat. However, when Heartfield begins to shoot at the boat, Mann shoots and kills him in self-defense. The killing of Heartfield, however, liberates Mann. As Jaye writes, “after the shooting, the boat becomes unwedged, and Mann is able to continue upstream. The symbolism is clear. Mann’s awareness of his own will has been awakened” (434). Though we must view his actions as part of a will to survive, as Mann reaches the hospital we begin to see his rage manifest itself through explicit and uncompromising critique. Knowing that the discovery of white male death by his hand will most certainly get him killed, he maintains, “But he shot at me fo Ah shot im. . .” (81). Also, although he fears he might be rowing “mah folks right inter death!” (82), he makes the crucial decision to go on. He thinks firmly to himself, “Naw, Ahm goin on, no mattah whut! He could not turn back now for the hills, not with Lulu in this boat. Not with Lulu in the fix she was in. He gritted his teeth, caught the oars, and rowed” (82). The tone in which he makes the statement, the gritting of the teeth, and the continuing to row, suggest an assuredness that had not been as present as before. More crucially, the land that had been initially Gothic begins to yield after his assertion of selfhood: “High over his head a plane zoomed; he looked up and saw a triangle of red and green light wing-
ing through the darkness. His fingers were hot and loose, as though all the feeling in his hands had turned to fire. But his body was cool; a listless wind was drying the sweat on him” (82). Wright replaces the ominous colors of gray and black with bursts of color, and in the place of the seemingly oppressive heat and ferocious wind Wright transforms these elements into an unthreatening presence that benefits Mann by cooling him. Having clearly connected the land to African Americans’ oppression, Wright suggests that enactments of subjectivity and resistance are intimately connected to the shift in their relationship to the land.

Wright’s naturalistic style, however, often renders his characters unable to forge a sustained resistance to racist oppression even as they achieve a measure of consciousness at how pervasive white supremacy is. A moment that should be focused on Mann’s heroic efforts is minimized by the signs—literally—of racism. As he reaches the Red Cross Hospital and takes his wife down the hall, he is confronted with a “FOR COLORED” sign where his wife has to be treated and which has marked the legacy of the South during Jim Crow segregation. After his wife and the baby die, the land again becomes an important component of the forces working against Mann. Advised that the rest of the family should leave “before that current gets stronger” (89), Mann is forced to leave his wife behind, becoming a precursor of the numbers of Katrina survivors forced to leave loved ones who survived the storm but died waiting for aid. Thus, the land acts for Mann, and historically for many African Americans, as a Gothic nightmare that is the physical manifestation of white hegemonic forces that denies African American humanity. Additionally, Mann is forcibly separated from the rest of his family by soldiers in order to search for other survivors of the flood. Again, Wright juxtaposes the struggle between blacks and the flood with that of the struggle with the southern racial narrative. Mann observes at one point while traveling with the soldier that has taken him, “As they neared the levee, [he] could see long black lines of men weaving snake-fashion about the levee-top. In front of him he could feel the river as though it were a live, cold hand touching his face. The levee was a ridge of dry land between two stretches of black water. The men on the levee-top moved slowly, like dim shadows” (97). Wright hints at an intimacy between Mann and the river, and sustains his depiction of the land as a malleable marker in the South’s racial dynamics. However, he clearly conflates the seemingly endless black water with the African American men we assume are being forced to work on the levee, becoming faceless objects that can be used for free, involuntary labor.
Mann soon observes, “On the levee-top the long lines of men merged into one whirling black mass. Shouts rose in a mighty roar. There came a vague sonorous drone like the far away buzzing in a sea-shell. Each second it grew louder. Lawd! thought Mann. That levees gone!” (97). The bursting of the levees, of course, recalls Katrina and how the collapse of the levees in New Orleans caused tragedy and destruction. As important, though, is how Wright’s description of the “lines of men” who become a “black mass” forecasts the reduction of Katrina survivors into a similar mass, an act that, for many, robbed their efforts to survive of meaning and their cries for help like a “sonorous drone.” For instance, Barbara Bush’s comment that, for some survivors, Katrina “‘is working out well for them’” (131) because they were already underprivileged ignores the physical and psychological trauma that led many to refuse to ever return to New Orleans. As damaging is Dyson’s point that media coverage of the aftermath of Katrina often rendered blackness synonymous with criminality, similarly reducing African Americans to a monolith: “The media’s role in framing blacks as outlaws and savages achieved a rare blatancy when it endlessly looped on television the same few frames of stranded blacks ‘looting’ food and other items, largely for survival. . . . By repeating the same few scenes the media helped spread the notion that black folk were in a state of social anarchy and were tearing violently at the fabric of civility and order” (166). The contrast of whites “finding” food merely highlights maintenance of a racial narrative that excuses whites but criminalizes blacks. Mann’s fear of being discovered using a stolen boat from a white man he killed shows a clear knowledge not only of the established hierarchy that places white life above black life. Fearing that he has been discovered, Mann thinks to himself at one point, “What would they do to a black man who had killed a white man in a flood? He did not know. But whatever it was must be something far more terrible than at other times” (90). Aside from the very telling acceptance of the normalcy of white violence against blacks in the South, Mann correlates an extreme disruption of the land with the possibility that white violence would become more extreme in responding to the ultimate southern taboo of killing a white man. Dyson makes a similar connection, stating that “immoral black behavior conveniently shifts in reference to black folk to suit the social or racial purposes of a given moment, or crisis, in the culture. Katrina was one of those moments of crisis” (167). Likewise, Mann recognizes that his actions will be construed as more heinous because of the flood and that the punishment that will be meted out will parallel the extremity of the flood.
Therefore, when Mann eventually returns to the Heartfield home, we are immediately able to understand his impulse to kill the family as one of survival. Jaye writes that “as [Mann] sees Heartfield’s wife and son, all the thoughts of fear, racism, and hatred rush back to him. He knows these people hold his fate in their hands. His entire experience tells him not save them” (435). The hatred and rage that he feels are not so much aimed at the mother and son as they are at the system of oppression that has brought them to this point. Yet, at the most important moment, according to Jaye, Mann “is jarred into action. In a truly noble act, he chooses not murder, but rescue” (435). Had Mann killed the Heartfield family, his rage would have been associated both with the flood and dismissed as part the stereotype of black pathology. Instead, Mann’s act moves beyond “the influence of social forces” that Jaye believes occurs (435). It forces readers to look towards the white characters as figures acting out violently and immorally and asks us to examine how the eruption of the land exacerbates the simmering racial tensions that have survived the Civil Rights Movement. Wright’s story challenges stereotypes that have been maintained through the scope and power of southern myth and tradition. That we can clearly see similarities between the Flood of 1927, in which the levees were intentionally destroyed, and the treatment and depiction of black Katrina survivors, suggests that the marginalization of African American life remains a consistent byproduct of white supremacist hegemony and an unnatural disaster exacerbated by moments of crisis.

Therefore, Kanye West’s controversial statement that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” emerges not only as an individual critique of the Bush administration’s delayed, oft-criticized response to Katrina but as an awareness of the historical tradition of the negligence and exploitation of African Americans. The realignment of white supremacist hegemony that Katrina revealed is due, as Dyson contends, to the fact that “the racist Southern Democrats of the Jim Crow era gave way to the liberal Democrats of the civil rights era. As a result, Republicans have largely spurned the black vote for the last forty years and courted conservative white constituencies that were hostile to black interests and people” (30). Beyond the political manifestations, hegemonic forces seek to maintain a racial hierarchy that allows whites not only to control the racial narrative, but to reduce African Americans to objects that can be culturally exploited and discarded. The killing of Mann, after he has rescued the Heartfields, and the “black mass” who are forced to work up
until the levees break testify to the continuance of stereotypes that establishes African Americans as a singular, faceless group. Mann’s brief escape and attempt to “die before he would let them kill him,” however tragic it is, takes him to the cusp of subjectivity and self-actualization and initiates a process unmistakably completed in Ernest Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men*.

### A Chocolate South: *A Gathering of Old Men* and Rewriting Myth

John Lowe argues, “Richard Wright knew, when he was writing *Uncle Tom’s Children*, that he had left the South forever, and the fictional personae he created in those pages are depicted through a form of historical elegy, an elegy not just for the dead” (62). Wright produces a mythic remembrance of the South from his childhood that, however nightmarish, pays tribute to African Americans long since forgotten by a narrative that privileges the antebellum ideas of (white) male chivalry, Confederate defiance, and white superiority. Gaines, by contrast, provides a contemporaneous chronicle of the South’s response to the changes of the Civil Rights Movement. The darkness of Wright’s vision is the result of separating individual African Americans from their communities and leaving them with no protection from the laws and practices of the South. Gaines himself contends that he differs from Wright not in his indictment of white supremacy but in Wright’s use of the South as a site that can never be recovered or potentially healing. Gaines avoids Wright’s tendency to discount and marginalize the strategies and relationships within the African American community that are employed to sustain individuals against racist aggression.

Wright’s violent articulation of black rage at the white world, usually ending in the destruction of the former, maintains a masculine ideal as the most effective mode of literary resistance. Too often, these works place black men not only at odds with the by-products of white supremacist hegemony, but with the black community as well. The men are relegated to a solitude from which they are unable to participate in collective resistance and reconstruction. As Keith Clark argues, while Wright’s black men may “occupy the common physical places, they fail to erect intimate spaces that might facilitate the healing process—spaces connoting not mere physical edifices but emotional and spiritual realms that stimulate resubjectivication” (25). Significant here is the general lack
of alternative or constructive black masculinities to offset the negative images that dominate the mainstream imagination. Although Gaines’s work centers on men, he explicitly interrogates images of black masculinity as part of the larger African American community. Gaines builds his construction of multiple black men off a canvas more heavily influenced by African American women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, who invested in fuller, kaleidoscopic viewings of the community. Like these authors, Gaines’s work seeks to “affirm the integrity of black life when whiteness is relegated to margins of concern” (Ward 346). The men’s attempts to wrestle their subjectivity back remains intimately connected to the community that has sustained them and their relationship to the land that they have shaped and from which their cultural traditions emerged. As Anissa Wardi notes, “Gaines personifies nature as a living force in the lives of the agrarian workers” (42). The collective effort of recovering the land—and the legacy it contains—transforms the South’s oppressive tradition and practices in the novel. The characters invoke the legacies of their ancestors to challenge the mythic construction of the South that marginalizes and erases them.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the death of the brutal Cajun farmer Beau Boutan serves as the catalyst for the appearance of a group of old black men in their seventies, recruited by the young white girl Candy Marshall to take blame for the shooting. The Marshalls own the plantation and most of the novel takes place here, as Candy tries to protect Mathu, who raised her and who was found near the body with a shotgun in his hand. The men in the novel seek redemption for a lifetime of inactivity from the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel reveals a southern landscape that is barely changed and could—in its look and its relationship—easily be mistaken for a pre-1960s South. Gaines’s novel resists an optimistic narrative that the Civil Rights Movement was immediately transformative to the South. Instead, Gaines shifts his focus to consider the maintenance of white supremacist ideals in post-Civil Rights America as the characters wrestle with the opportunity to finally confront the racist oppression they have been silently enduring. Shifting narrators from chapter to chapter, Gaines de-centers his novel to include the voices of men who have been silent throughout the twentieth century. This separates Gaines from many of his black literary forefathers. Clark suggests, “Gaines discards the monologism of protest discourse in which the voice of a lone disembodied, maimed subject predominates. *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* are best categorized by these microscopic focus on a singu-
lar man’s trek through the jagged and debilitating American social terrain” (71). What results is a multi-vocal tale which centers on the storytelling in which the men engage, creating space from which they can lay the groundwork for a resistant, progressive black community.

The collective telling rejects post-integration claims that instances of racism are individual exceptions as opposed to the pervasive presence of systemic racism. While the Civil Rights Movement often focused on the legal challenges to *du jure* segregation, Gaines is clearly interested in the extralegal world of myth and tradition. Thus, when the white sheriff Mapes arrives, clearly as the representative of the legal battleground on which much of the Civil Rights Movement was waged, he is relegated from authority figure to witness. After all, he knows that Mathu is the only one of the men brave enough to kill Beau. Although he is overtly abusive, slapping the men to make them rescind their “confession,” he is not the one they wish to defy. In truth, they await Beau’s father Fix who, even though he has not been involved in local lynchings and beatings, represents the legacy of racist oppression. Instead of fearing the possibility of their death, as Mann does until the end of the story, they confront it in the hopes of overturning the tradition of an oppressive and unyielding southern landscape.

Thus, Wardi rightly points out, “True to his African American pastoral sensibilities, Gaines stresses the fecundity and regenerative possibilities of the blood-soaked southern soil” (44). Of course, the mixture of Beau’s blood with the grass and dirt of the field stands as the central image in the novel. However, one of the key moments in the novel’s explicit engagement of the themes of legacy and the land remains the men’s arrival at the cemetery. In a chapter narrated by one of the black men named Cherry, we see the first group of old men who were picked up by Clatoo dropped off to wait at the cemetery while another group is picked up. When they come to the all-black graveyard, which had “been the burial ground for black folks ever since the time of slavery” (44), Cherry points out that many of the graves had not been marked and that many of the separate family plots had mixed together. Cherry sees this lack of individual marking as incidental; at one point he says, “They had all come from the same place, they had mixed together when they was alive, so what’s the difference if they mixed together now?” (44). Yet one can not ignore the political, historical, and racial implications that permeate the gravesite. For instance, Cherry, commenting on Jacob’s mulatto sister’s body in the graveyard, reveals a pride in lighter-skinned
blacks: “[Jacob’s family] was against her living [in Bayonne] in the first place round the darker people. I’m not dark myself, I’m light as them, but I’m not French, not quality. Them, they’re quality, them; but they wouldn’t even take her body home. Buried her with the kind she lived with” (45). The graveyard acts as a historical marker, not only of the inter- and intra-racial politics of the community, but also of the men’s inactivity throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, the graveyard stands as representative of their present. They are literally staring death in the face. Faced with so clear a sign of their own mortality, the graveyard becomes a site that animates the men to invoke the memories of their ancestors as a vital part of the move toward subjectivity and rewriting the area’s racial hierarchy and myth.

Although the men take turns telling the stories of the abuse of their families as their reason for “killing” Beau, Johnny Paul’s testimony most explicitly ties together his communion with the land and his desire to protect the community and reclaim the legacy of his ancestors. His claim that Beau’s tractor would eventually plow up the graves that the men have visited is predicated on protecting the memory of African American legacy and becomes the key to the recasting of southern myth and identity:

Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules—like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. . . Mama and Papa worked too hard in these fields. They mama and they papa worked too hard in these same fields. They mama and they papa people worked too hard, too hard to have that tractor just come in that graveyard and destroy all proof that they ever was. (92)

The tractor that Beau rode and that Johnny Paul fears symbolizes the technological advancement that has made collective black labor virtually extinct, while increasing the profit and efficiency of the whites and Cajuns. Not merely concerned with their present act, Johnny Paul invokes the memory of generations of black labor that the tractor threatens to erase, both literally and metaphorically. His challenge to the southern racial narrative, then, does not emerge from an individual imperative that is separate from his community, but is instead directly linked to that community’s historical right to the land and the attempts by the “New South” to ignore that community’s influence in blood, sweat, and spirit.
Johnny Paul also establishes an intimate connection to the land that the tractor will disrupt. What Gaines makes clear, of course, is that it is not the land that oppresses African Americans, but the use of the land to exacerbate racial divisions, seen in Gaines’s novel through the tensions between black and Cajuns, and to render African Americans continually subservient to white land owners. The assertion of African American subjectivity, in fact, finds the land a supportive element. As the men take turns telling their compelling and tragic stories, the land becomes an active witness that allows the men the opportunity to testify to the significance of the legacy of the people and the land have to the constructing of southern culture, life, and tradition. As Tucker tells his story, for instance, the chapter narrator Rufe notes, “We all stayed quiet. Everything was quiet—the weeds, the fields, the swamps—everything quiet, quiet. Waiting for him to go on” (96). Instead of indicting the land as solely a site of terror and destruction that we frequently see in Wright’s work, Gaines presents the possibility of the land as affirming, as a marker of legacy for everyone in the South, and as a receptive witness and recorder to the stories that might construct an inclusive and accurate southern mythos.

The clearest example of the manipulation of the land to establish and maintain racist hierarchy comes from the Marshall plantation itself. During Tucker’s remembrance of his brother Silas, he reports, “After the plantation was dying out, the Marshalls dosed out the land for sharecropping, giving the best land to the Cajuns, and giving us the worst—that bottomland near the swamps. Here, our own black people had been working this land a hundred years for the Marshall plantation, but when it came to sharecropping, now they give the best land to the Cajuns, who had never set foot on the land before” (96). Tucker’s story reveals the shift in white supremacy and privilege from the end of slavery into segregation. Instead of the end of white supremacy, we merely see the realignment of racial hierarchy through the unfair distribution of the land. The Marshalls’ unequal division of the land reiterates the tradition of white privilege, but it maintains an economic hierarchy that keeps both groups dependent on the Marshalls. The treatment of Candy, then, stands alongside the men’s actions not only in reversing the individual, personal mistreatment by Fix, the Cajuns, and poor whites, but between their collective subjectivity and the hegemonic forces that are initiated and sustained by generations of the white elite that includes the Marshalls. Candy, according to Gaines, “has a duty—her duty is to continue that old patriarchal
tradition” (327). Candy’s involvement is relegated to a secondary, almost tertiary, element in favor of the men’s opportunities for redemption and resubjectivication. When Mapes finally decides to take Mathu to prison, after concluding that Fix will not show up, the men move into Mathu’s house to discuss a new plan of action. Candy demands to be included, but Clatoo responds, “This time we have to [talk] Candy. Just the men with guns” (173). When Candy objects, “Like hell. This is my place,” Clatoo informs her, “I know that, Candy. But we don’t want you there this time” (173). The men reject Candy’s attempt to invoke white privilege and reveal her desire to retain that control even as she promotes herself as a supportive figure of the African American community. It becomes apparent that the black men have their own, independent agenda, and are willing to resist all manifestations of white supremacist capitalist hegemony. They physically create a space for themselves, where their own voices and perspectives can be heard.

In discussing The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman Gaines has said, “the difference between Dilsey [from William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury] and Miss Jane Pittman is that Faulkner gets Dilsey talking her story from his kitchen; the young school teacher in my book gets Miss Jane’s story from Miss Jane’s kitchen. And it makes a difference” (qtd in Lowe 313). Gaines of course recognizes that black and white southern writers have more in common than is usually discussed. Those commonalities center on their individual and collective relationship to the land. Gaines points out, “I think Southern writers—any Southern writer—they have much more in common than differences, especially if they write about the South, and if they write about the character of the South—the land, the towns, the cities” (qtd in Lowe 313). However, Gaines makes a clear distinction that, while the presence of African Americans has consistently and substantially impacted white southern writers, the ability of African American characters to tell their own stories in their own spaces is paramount to realigning conceptions and realities of southern tradition. A Gathering of Old Men shifts the site of storytelling from the kitchen to the porch, specifically the defiant Mathu’s porch. By telling their stories, not only from their own mouths, but in their own space, the men claim the South for themselves and their community. In doing so, it becomes virtually impossible not to include their stories as a primary element in viewing the South. More importantly, Gaines, himself an African American who eventually returned to the South, enacts a ritual that explicitly reveals the strategy through which African Ameri-
can agency and legacy become part of post-Civil Rights southern identity. Not only, then, does *A Gathering of Old Men* invest in the lives of its residents who have remained in and around the quarters of the Marshall plantation, he forecasts the reality that the South must face with the large, collective return of African Americans. The presence and agency of both populations demands a fundamental adjustment not only of the traditional mythic vision of the South, but of a present and future that rejects the white backlash that emerged in the South in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Gaines recognizes that what binds the multiple racial and ethnic populations together remains the land. It is, therefore, the recognition of their primary role in the legacy of the land and their communion with the land that acts a key element in achieving subjectivity and transformation. So, when the fifty-year-old manchild Charlie returns to confess that he killed Beau and that he had attempted to run to the North, he necessarily invokes the land as part of his self-actualization:

> I ran, I ran, I ran—I don’t know how long. But no matter where I went, where I turnt, I was still on Marshall place. If I went toward Pichot, before I got there, something stopped me. If I turnt and went toward Morgan, something stopped me. If I went toward the highway on the back, something there stopped me, too. Something like a wall, a wall I couldn’t see, but it stopped me every time. I fell on the ground and screamed and screamed. I bit in the ground. I got a handful of dirt and stuffed in my mouth, trying to kill myself. Then I just laid there, laid there, laid there. Sometime round sundown—no, just 'fore sundown, I heard a voice calling my name. I laid there listening, listening, listening, but I didn’t hear it no more. But I knowed that voice was calling me back here. (*A Gathering* 192–3)

Gaines rejects the North, literally and metaphorically as a solution for his African American population. Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) cast the North not only as insufficient but irrelevant. Miss Jane’s attempts to escape North fail when she gets lost, as if Gaines drew a virtual wall at the Mason-Dixon Line. In *A Lesson*, Grant Wiggins returns to the South from California, like Gaines himself, unable to break the power the land and the culture have on his consciousness. For Gaines’s characters, therefore, the process of becoming subjects must take place in the South. Escape is not an
option. Either his characters assert themselves in conjunction with the southern landscape or they will be consumed by it. Charlie attempts to use the land for its traditional purpose of destroying African Americans. His attempts at suicide are dependent on the land to serve as the same manifestation of white supremacy that it had been for Mann in “Down by the Riverside” and for the family members of the many of the old men. Yet the land rejects his efforts in part because of his assertion of selfhood, much like Mann’s killing of Mr. Heartfield results in an environment much more acquiescent to his efforts to save his family. In Charlie’s case, the land not only denies his attempts to kill himself, it literally calls him back to Mathu’s house and encourages him to take responsibility for what happened and complete the ritual of testifying and witnessing that the other men have begun.

The communal spirit that surrounds Charlie before his death rejects the realignment of white supremacy in post-Civil Rights America that is predicated on the appropriation of African American figures as examples of racial equality and progress. Yet the interracial relationship between the LSU running backs, the Cajun Gil Boutan and the African American Calvin Harrison, that many see as an example of a colorblind South is contrasted by the appearance of Luke Will and his friends, whites who are dependent on older methods of racial violence and hierarchy to jump-start a dying era. Though anticlimactic, especially once Gil is able to convince his father Fix to stay at home, Gaines himself notes in an interview, “Fix’s kind of vigilante vengeance is dying out, but there will be the new Luke Will type. The Luke Wills are in the police department. Fix is seventy or eighty and can’t shoot straight, but Luke will do it for him” (Doyle 168–169). Gaines’s charge that the younger generation of racists will assimilate into society in order carry on the ideological beliefs of Fix’s generation is in the dominance of the white conservatism in the South in the latter half of the twentieth century. Founded on white resistance to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the use of coded language, the politically conservative white South helped engineered a counterrevolution to resist social programs that combatted racist hiring practices, college admission policies, and voting disenfranchisement. In such an environment, the outbursts of rage during Hurricane Katrina, from rapper Kanye West to Mayor Ray Nagin, were vilified because of the refusal to recognize the humanity of African Americans.

The attempt to rebuild New Orleans through a “post-racial” lens ignores the dominant presence of African Americans in the city before
Katrina and, instead, uses the claim of the colorblind to refashion the city as smaller, whiter, and wealthier. The concern over the rebuilding of New Orleans fueled Nagin’s “chocolate city” speech. Despite Nagin’s apology in igniting a firestorm, his comments are very telling about the politics of race, the reclamation of land, and the rewriting of New Orleans’s—and by extension the South’s—legacy: “It’s time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. And I don’t care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day” (qtd in Horne 314).

Nagin’s rambling comments also included a belief that “God wants it to be,” but do not diminish the very real sense that white elite business interests were being privileged over those of working and underclass African Americans who had not yet returned. By contrast, Nagin casts the perspective and presence of African Americans as the principal element in the fabric of New Orleans. Instead of relying solely on the drawing power of Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras, Nagin seems to contend that culturally, economically, and spiritually, the city of New Orleans is primarily black.

Nagin’s comments, which endeared him to many African Americans, angered some whites who supported him in his first term and had been able to return after Katrina. Yet the support of Nagin and the outrage African Americans expressed at the delays in being able to return to New Orleans extended into the demands to make arrangements for evacuees to vote in the mayoral election. Similarly, revelatory documentaries like Spike Lee’s stunning *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and the Oscar-nominated *Trouble the Water* (2008) center on the stories of the Katrina survivors and depict their struggles to return and reclaim the city they lost to disaster, neglect, and exploitation. African Americans from both films emerge as the driving engine in the documentaries, which provide human faces and stories that reject media constructions and place Katrina in the context of the larger racial, economic, and regional narrative. The men in the novel, then, forecast the attempt by the African American community to speak back against attempts to destructively characterize and disenfranchise Katrina survivors. These events help contemporary readers view *A Gathering of Old Men* through a desire to establish a collective, autonomous African American communal voice that transforms our vision of the South to one heavily influenced by an assertive and productive blackness. Such a community mirrors the African American female communities in the work of Alice Walker. In all, Gaines depicts
an expansive African American community that can recover the legacy of African Americans in the South and actively restructure the present and the future in transforming the South into a racially inclusive, multi-vocal space in the twenty-first century.

**Transforming Home**

Candy offers Mathu a ride home at the end of *A Gathering of Old Men*. His refusal, and decision to ride with Clatoo, not only completes the negation of white privilege that Candy has attempted to benignly enact throughout the novel; it also uses Mathu’s newfound respect for the other African American men as a clear stepping stone toward a progressive and inclusive southern identity and landscape. Mark Arax points out that “the reverse population flow has two faces. Young blacks are following job or college opportunities and planting roots in the same Southern soil that their parents and grandparents fled more than half a century ago. At the same time, blacks who spend their working lives in California are looking to retire in a new South” (A1). Both groups bring the expectation of equal treatment that stands in contrast to the white South’s conservative response to the Civil Rights Movement. However, the emergence of black political and economic power has yet to prevent moments like Katrina, Jasper, and Jena. The works of Wright and Gaines become significant, therefore, because they reveal the importance of reclaiming the legacy of the southern landscape to the present and future of race relations in the South. Central to this reclamation is the recasting of southern myth and tradition to include recognition of the stories and traditions of African Americans as primary in the development of southern identity and narrative. The reverse migration has the potential to transform the conceptions and realities of the South. Instead of moving to the North and the West, Wright and Gaines produce works that “signal a kind of communion with the South, a landscape that may be at once nourishing, pleasurable, and suicidal. . . but, above all else, a landscape that is home” (Wardi 39). However, with both authors it becomes obvious that such a transformation cannot take place in the future without a reformation and assessment of the past and the present. Charlie’s return and testimony completes the process of re-visioning that the old men have enacted. After Charlie’s death, the ritual laying-on of hands binds everyone to each other and the land. Dirty Red initiates the ritual as he “touched [Charlie], hoping that some of that stuff he had 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 too” (210). The community’s act not only connects them to Charlie, but also serves as a way of remembering their ancestors, an act which becomes doubly important for the grandchildren as the eventual transporters of the community’s stories and legacy.

After all, as Dyson points out, “Black folk have been a pilgrim people, a wayfaring group, a folk who are rarely ever really at home, unsettled, always uprooted, forever migrating from place to place, exiles in their own country, their movements spurred as much by tragedy as opportunity” (198). The works of Wright and Gaines reveal a more complex relationship to the region that has been constructed particularly in opposition to the “free land” of the North. Wright debunked idealized images of the North in Native Son, and in “Down by the Riverside,” Gaines chronicles the strategies African Americans could employ to confront the contemporaneous presence of racist oppression. Both works anticipate the eruptions of the racial tensions during the post-Civil Rights South, specifically the controversy of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the complex presence of an assertive African American collective in conflict with a white South attempting to maintain its racial hierarchy. As many African Americans return to the South, their claims of the land as home will initiate a new chapter in the regional discourse of the southern racial narrative and the legacy that has had national implications since the founding of the republic.

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