In the years since the culture wars refocused issues related to the nation’s common heritage (Goebel and Hall 1995; Moreland 1999; Spring 1998), teacher education programs have transformed the status of multicultural studies from elective studies for individual students to required components for program completion. Universities are required to provide evidence of the integration of cultural studies into teacher preparation programs in order to secure National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation (NCATE 1999). Just how effective are universities in the multicultural preparation of teachers? Is there evidence that suggests that teacher education programs prepare unbiased and competent teachers to engage effectively in culturally complex school communities?

A longitudinal study conducted by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin suggests that the educational achievement of some minority groups has declined during the twentieth century because of the failure of school administrators and teachers to conceptualize and deliver instruction in culturally appropriate ways (Chapa 1998). Other studies suggest that learning is complicated by our human tendency to resist certain knowledge and that cultural differences are often experienced as differences characterized by resistance (Edgerton 1994; Felman 1982; Moreland 1995). One implication of these claims is that learning often requires that we abandon some beliefs in order to integrate new perspectives and that we are often attached to the very beliefs we are challenged to revise.

The research reported here provides an analysis and discussion of how a study of Ernest Gaines’s 1993 novel, A Lesson Before Dying, led to a more focused inquiry about the history of Creoles in Louisiana and the implications of that history for us as teachers or students preparing to teach. Four classes of multicultural education students had run up against the limits of our conceptualizations of Gaines’s use of Creole characters, references to Creole heritage, and partially erased traces of Creole history (Doyle 2000). In the fifth class, about which the current study reports, resources and pedagogical strategies were revised in an effort to strengthen...
inquiry at the very limits of the previous study. Questions that shaped this study included the following: Were we, as readers of Gaines’s novel, resisting knowledge about Creoles in Louisiana? Did we possess more knowledge than we acknowledged? Were we afraid to explore cultural issues related to Creoles? Were we afraid to talk about Creoles, ourselves, and ourselves in relation to Creoles? And, perhaps, were there omissions from the public record that contributed to our resistance to knowing more about our shared history? These and other questions led me to consider whether a revision of the public record might contribute to the knowledge work to which we committed ourselves as teachers, students, and citizens in a nation less than just at the start of the twenty-first century. In some way, each of these questions shaped the study reported here.

**Background of the Study**

For four years students in the multicultural foundations course had found it difficult to talk about Gaines’s references to Creoles. As references to a people once significant to the history of Louisiana, we seemed to know too little to carry on a rigorous inquiry. The difficulty was not limited to a knowledge base, although there was much we did not know. Many difficulties lay in the ways we related to one another, whether we were natives of the region, moved here long ago, or were in Louisiana just to attend university. We employed the Gaines novel as the second text in a course designed to provide a historical foundation for the study of education and schooling in the United States. However, Gaines’s novel was designed to draw us as a community into inquiry about the region where we currently lived and worked and studied, whether we planned to teach in Louisiana or not.

The use of literature and autobiographical studies are common elements of multicultural and foundations courses in recent years, and there is evidence that suggests students often find these approaches effective means to multicultural ends. Assessing the efficacy of using this particular novel had been a project of the author’s for four years. The recent report addressing the first four years of the study had led the author to revise the list of resources employed and the ways students would interact with them and one another (Doyle 2000). Evidence suggests that the study of literature and autobiographical inquiry, when combined with opportunities for writing, reflection, exchange of ideas, and revision, may contribute to a significant rethinking of a person’s assumptive world (Marshall, Sears, and Schubert 2000). There is evidence that suggests as well that cultural inquiry sometimes produces unexpected, unwanted, and even contradictory effects among participants (Henderson and Hawthorne 2000). For this study, issues related to identity, particularly as identity has been constructed in the state of Louisiana, became the focus of our inquiry. We started with Gaines’s references to Creoles and ended up rethinking the ways we define ourselves.
The Multicultural Context

At the start of the semester students of this course discussed the designations we made about our own identities. One-third of the thirty-five students in the class identified themselves as something other than “White” or “Black.” Some students identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino/Latina at some moments but by other terms at other moments. With representation from Gulf Rim nations, students drew distinctions among cultures of Central and South America and the Caribbean. Native American members of the class described tribal identities as influenced by both tribe and clan influences. The importance of clan identity and the notion of the clan as one extended family across tribal nations was generally unfamiliar to students. The boundaries of these distinctions were drawn and redrawn with much more ease by international and tribal students.

Before I offer a brief summary of the novel, I would like to provide some explanation for why this shifting and contextual identity index became so significant to efforts to think again and differently about questions previous classes had considered with little success. Over the first four years of the study, Gaines’s construction of one of the characters of the novel proved to be a significant challenge to the students and me, their professor. One of the women characters, Vivian Baptiste, who is the beloved to the teacher/protagonist in the story, is described as a light-skinned Creole woman from Free LaCove, Louisiana. Vivian is a teacher as well, who studied at Xavier University in New Orleans in the 1940s. The connection between Creole people and New Orleans was evident to some students, particularly to those who had a working knowledge of the jazz and blues traditions of the region. But in this novel, set in the late 1940s, Vivian lives and teaches in rural Louisiana, west of Baton Rouge, in an area more commonly associated with Cajuns. Gaines makes other racial distinctions too, describing people as dark-skinned Blacks, light-skinned Blacks, Mulattos, Cajuns, and Whites who are from good stock and Whites who are not.

Across the range of racial differences there are other intersecting markers as well, often associated with ownership of property or status. The lighter the skin color within the two larger racial groups of Black and White, the more freedom and property characters tend to possess. This is as true along that part of the racial continuum associated with Blacks as with Whites, and there are some Blacks who are much more educated and propertied than Whites. No matter how much education or property a Black person in the novel possesses, however, one’s freedom remains limited by the privileges enjoyed by Whites on the basis of race alone.

As the students and I read this novel and volunteered in schools, we observed evidence of this particular kind of racial infrastructure still in force. For most students, the historical record to which they had been exposed had not prepared them for this contradiction. It became clear that Creole culture and heritage in Louisiana remain significant forces even in contemporary society. The African American
teachers with whom these students volunteered were often members of families whose elders for many generations had possessed advanced degrees, licensure, and family businesses in medicine, law, teaching, business, and the arts. The distinctions between African Americans of Creole descent and poor African Americans who have had little or no access to educational opportunities provided students of this study with an important opportunity to rethink racial assumptions common today throughout much of the United States. The national predisposition for collapsing race into a post-Civil War construction of Black and White identities poorly represents the historical record and the prevailing material culture.

Ernest Gaines’s novel resonates as an important text for other reasons, too. The marketplace economy has provided a boon to Louisiana’s cultural diversity in the form of a great variety of commodities described as characteristic of Creole and/or Cajun cultures. On a global scale, things packaged under these labels can now be bought and sold in great variety. Differentiating between Creole and Cajun cultures, however, is an immense task that is difficult even in close proximity to Creole and Cajun communities. Prepackaged cultural constructions may represent an economic boon, but in educational terms, the stereotypes and misappropriations associated with these commodities may pose another serious threat to the accuracy of historical memory, if not the historical record itself. Gaines’s work provides entry into the recovery of at least some of that cultural memory.

Summary of the Novel and Discussion

“I WAS NOT THERE, yet I was there” (Gaines 1993, 4). With these words Ernest Gaines begins this novel, set in the 1940s in fictive Bayonne, Louisiana, common to other novels of his as well. The story reports events that unfold in the aftermath of a liquor store robbery and set of murders. A presumably innocent and simpleminded Black man is handed over to the wrath of a community dominated by racism, segregation, and eye-for-an-eye judicial practices when crimes have been committed against Whites by Blacks. The evening of the crime, young Jefferson had accepted a ride from two young fellows with prior histories of making trouble. Brother and Bear take Jefferson along with them to the liquor store, where an argumentative encounter between the two and the owner, Mr. Grope, leads to an exchange of gunfire and the death of these three people. Stunned by the events, Jefferson panics and is caught at the scene, accused of complicity in planning and executing the crime. The state-appointed attorney defends Jefferson by arguing that he was no more capable of planning or committing this crime than a hog might have been. Still, Jefferson is found guilty in late fall and sentenced to death by electrocution, although months pass before the date is set for his execution.

The story of Jefferson’s stay on death row is framed by the grief of two women who seek a redemptive educational experience for Jefferson. Jefferson’s godmother, Miss Emma, and her lifelong friend, Miss Louise, labor on behalf of Jef-
ferson to secure the lessons necessary to take up his final months and his own death with some measure of dignity. It is a long and difficult journey for many people in this community. The weight of the project lies with Miss Emma, Jefferson’s godmother, who shares the burden with others in the community in ways that draw each person according to their talents into the circle of Jefferson’s life and death. Miss Louise’s nephew, the university-educated Grant Wiggins, is given the chore of teaching Jefferson before he is executed that he is a man, not a hog. Grant serves as the teacher to the Black community of the Henri Pichot plantation, where he grew up and attended school as well. The one-room school is also the church on Sunday and the community center at other times. How Grant Wiggins, a cynical, despairing, and often cruel teacher of plantation-quarters children manages to succeed in the cause of helping Jefferson die with dignity is a story that unfolds against great odds. Some of the difficulties are associated with how some people’s contributions to their communities have been systematically erased from the historical record and the memory of the community. Some of the grace of this novel is associated with the recovery of that memory.

The Evidence of Creole Culture in the Novel

Through eight decades of work in the big house for the Pichot family, Miss Emma has secured for herself a meager livelihood and one of the old slave-quarters houses at the back of the plantation. Her friend and Grant’s aunt, Tante Lou, has also secured a small home in the quarters through similar work and an occasional season in the cane fields to earn extra money. She has used this money over the years to send Grant to university. She still provides Grant with a home, meals, and other comforts while he teaches down the lane. Grant’s parents, however, Lou’s sister and her husband, left the plantation when Grant was a boy, to pursue a better life in California. Addressed by the French word for aunt, Tante Lou provides Grant with the means to leave Bayonne and return twice, once in his teens to follow his parents to California and later to study for three years at the university. Each time Grant returned to Bayonne and to the quarters more miserable than when he had left but still in search of his own dignity. In recent years, he has fallen in love with Vivian, a young brown-skinned woman Gaines identifies as Creole, who speaks both French and English and teaches at the Catholic school at the back of town in Bayonne.

Vivian Baptiste challenges Grant to learn the lessons of his own dignity in spite of the racist society that confronts them both at many levels. Vivian’s own family has disowned her over issues of racial terrain. Vivian’s impending divorce from the father of her children places Vivian and Grant in some jeopardy. Vivian does not want to give her estranged husband any reason to challenge her in her claim to custody of her two children. She is discreet and cautious about her relationship with Grant and provides for her children with great care. She is courageous, how-
ever, and negotiates relationships from the position of one who released herself from the obligations imposed by racist attitudes. Her support of Miss Emma’s project for Jefferson and the kindness she extends to Grant’s Aunt Lou and the other elders from the quarters aligns her with those who expect more from Grant than he is willing to offer without resistance. She refuses to leave Bayonne simply to search for a better life. She has already been cut off from her own family as a result of marrying a dark man, rather than a light-skinned Creole like herself, and she has invested herself in the community of Bayonne. She values her membership in the community of Bayonne and does not romanticize the idea of escape.

Like Vivian, there are other characters in the novel that consistently craft relationships beyond the reach of racism. These people invite Grant to do the same. Even though justice fails once again in the case of Jefferson’s execution, the human capacity to live honorably and with dignity recovers for some in this community the power to overcome the fear and trauma produced by racism. Across all the racial boundaries drawn and redrawn in this novel, there remains the possibility for human solidarity. Grant eventually discovers this capacity within himself and with others.

**Reading and Writing Competencies**

The foundations class was designed to provide students with many opportunities to write in formal and informal ways. Students were instructed to construct questions raised by their own readings to assigned sections of the novel and to respond to those questions by returning to the novel, previous class discussions, and other resources to rethink their questions and hypothesize about their possible answers. They were required to engage in a kind of writing that produced evidence of original inquiry and attentive, resourceful problem solving. Students read Gaines’s novel with the same attentive care they had learned to give to their reading of Joel Spring’s text during the first ten weeks of the semester. They identified their own questions, wrote essays that were discussed in class, engaged their peers in challenging discussions, and revised reflective writing both in and away from class. They completed essays for exams and were provided opportunities to revise their exam responses for additional credit.

A comparison of student writings to the body of available scholarly writing satisfied my demand that students raise and address a comprehensive range of issues related to the novel. Students had provided sufficient evidence of this competence over four years (Doyle 2000).

Our class writings during the previous four years had been similar to scholarly writing about Gaines’s novel in another way too. We had encountered some of the same difficulties and had demonstrated difficulty with writing, talking, and thinking about some of the same issues that scholars also seemed to have trouble working through. The greatest area of shared difficulty had to do with identifying with
any confidence how Gaines’s references to Creole people had relevance for the cultural dilemmas we faced in our own lives.

We discussed what Gaines meant by calling someone a Creole, someone else a Mulatto, someone else a free person of color, or when he referred to a great many people without reference to color, although he seemed to imply he was not referring to a White person. Questions about other characters in the novel and what their relationships might be to the issue of racial color in Louisiana often led previous classes to discussions that ended haltingly, with more implied than said. When we attempted to analyze issues of race in Louisiana we often found ourselves faced with a kind of paradoxical knowing. A few students claimed to have access to Creole information in the form of family secrets. These secrets were not wholly contained in the past. They seemed to have significance for the present as well.

Students found it difficult to discuss openly what they meant when they claimed they had family information about Creole heritage. The available literary scholarship had supported our work with the novel up to this point and had helped the author determine that students were writing competently about Gaines’s work. But that same body of scholarship did not offer much help on the issue of Creole identity and the significance of Creole references in Gaines’s work. It seemed evident that we needed more historical resources if we were going to follow this line of inquiry with any rigor. And a rigorous inquiry seemed appropriate because we were obviously ill prepared to make connections between Gaines’s references and our own lives. It was hoped that additional resources would support inquiry since the pedagogical strategies returned us again and again to the very issues we had so clearly resisted in previous years. Our curriculum had become a place of turmoil not unlike that described by Slattery and Daigle as their experience of reading Gaines’s work (1994). We could not control what we would produce in our inquiry, but we needed to interrogate the responses produced by our work with this novel.

The Design of the Foundations Class

For most class sessions, one-fourth of the students came to class prepared to share written essays constructed from the class’s assigned reading. Each student was required to read each section of each text but each student had to write formally for class presentation only five times over sixteen weeks. When these five assignments were considered in the context of several exams, field experience reports, and the construction of a philosophy of education, the claim may be supported that this was a course designed to provide students with a variety of writing opportunities.

We spent the first ten weeks on Joel Spring’s 1998 text, studying U.S. educational history from the early 1600s through the twentieth century, and the last four weeks on the Gaines novel. Students had a tendency in the beginning of each se-
mester to blame their ancestors for all the ills of U.S. history. Students believed generally, or at least often claimed to believe, that the current young generation was well on its way to solving the problems of social injustice. These problems were identified as institutionalized racism, sexism, religious intolerance, and other forms of inequity. After a complete round of student writings however, usually completed by the third week of the semester, most students entered into the analysis of their readings with a more appropriate and tempered response.

Regarding matters of race and gender, however, students tended to retain a kind of defensive bravado longer than they did for class privilege or religious intolerance. The students evidenced a high level of investment in believing that they were not themselves racist or sexist, at least “not without just cause” (Class notes 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999). An analysis of unearned privilege (McIntosh 1988) almost always produced a protest against being made to feel bad for what others had done throughout history. This particular form of self-defense was often the first theme explored in reflective and autobiographical writing.

I continued to employ the work of Joel Spring and Ernest Gaines over these five years for many reasons. It seemed to me these authors and particular texts provided the kind of insistent call to rethinking history and our assumptive worldviews that teacher preparation students most need in order to meet the challenges of teaching other people’s children. Joel Spring’s work presents scholarly evidence that challenges any claim that culture has become a divisive issue in the nation’s politics of education only in the late twentieth century. Also, Ernest Gaines receives wide acclaim for his brilliant portrayal of life among competing racial groups in Louisiana. Because the novel is set in Louisiana and presents an account of a young Black man’s suspicious conviction of capital murder and the imposition of the death sentence by electric chair, it is a novel that seems relevant to the particular and urgent issues of our time. Also, since the story unfolds from the perspective of an angry and cynical African American (also Creole?) teacher who is obligated by family relations to teach a young, convicted Black man (also Creole?) how to die with dignity, the novel presents the kinds of complexities associated with the imagined heroic work of teaching against the background of cruel realities. The teacher in this novel is confronted with what he believes to be an impossible task, just as many teachers in Louisiana and the nation at large sometimes experience the challenges of teaching in contemporary times to be nearly overwhelming.

Providing a Foundation

Students enrolled in the foundations classes were, for the most part, enrolled in one of their first courses of a teacher education program. One of the objectives of the course has been to increase writing competencies for each student no matter what level of writing competence students evidence at the start of the semester. To that end, many opportunities for writing and sharing one’s writing have always
been provided to students in addition to the required five essays in response to their readings. Sometimes the essays and discussions proceeded on friendly terms with surprisingly moving effects. At other times discussions were heated and defensive. Each of the classes responded in similar and different ways, but each group always responded powerfully to the texts and assignments of the course. That pattern of interactions and the levels of competence students evidenced in other ways convinced me that many design elements of the course could be left in place between the fourth and fifth years. I decided to change only those elements that might increase our ability to engage one another more productively and in more conceptually complex ways as we sorted through and reconsidered our assumptive worlds (Cowan 1998).

Identity as Relational in Gaines’s Louisiana

The works of Sybil Kein (1999), Mary Gehman and Nancy Reis (1988), Mary Gehman (1994), and Virginia Dominguez (1986) were added as resources to the class discussions. These texts provided some of the historical information we needed to make better sense of our own questions about Gaines’s novel, even if they did not provide us with any answers. Students learned about the tripartite racial structure employed in Louisiana until the time of the Civil War and about the great entrepreneurial successes of Creole business people in education, business, industry, law, and the arts. We explored the complicated family histories that developed from a sociolegal system that sanctioned relationships between White men and Creole women. We considered as well what happened to the people of Louisiana when the three-race system was replaced with a two-race system that defined race in terms of fractions of bloodline influences and assigned all privileges to Whites only.

During our discussions of family influences on current racial attitudes students tended to distinguish their own racial attitudes from those of their parents and elders by claiming a perspective different from that dominant in their families. This was generally true across racial lines. Some African American students observed that their own families had a long history of racism. Some claimed further that it was not the racism of their ancestors that made them angry as much as their elders’ continuing preference for either dark-skinned or light-skinned people. The Civil Rights movement of the sixties had led some families to identify along lines of dark African American heritage, whereas other families chose to identify more with their French or Hispanic or Caribbean heritage. This kind of discussion often surprised other students.

Students acknowledged generally that Gaines’s novel made these kinds of issues more difficult to ignore. It was evident to most students that Gaines presented a much more complex view of identity forces in the African American community than he did in the White community, but this conclusion was accompanied as well by the observation that sometimes it was hard to tell whether Gaines was present-
izing a character as White, Black, Creole, Cajun, Mulatto, or sometimes as part White, part Black, part Creole, and still part something else.

Racial influences on family identities were often difficult to draw but an examination of the family’s history in relation to manual labor seemed to provide some leverage on the matter. Vivian and Grant and Mr. Antoine all held positions as teachers within the community and seemed to be members of families where that was not out of the ordinary. Therefore they seemed to have been influenced by Creole ancestry. They enjoyed some status in educational terms even if they enjoyed what seemed to be only a little of the economic benefit. The class wondered whether Tante Lou was not of Creole descent because she worked as a cook and house servant in the big house all those generations and only worked the fields to make extra money to send Grant to California and then to university. Had her family held a place of status in society prior to the Civil War? Were the years she served in the big house those years that followed the Civil War and the loss of the Creole’s place in a three-race society?

Was Miss Emma’s family once Creole too? She too worked in the house of the Henri Pichot family. Jefferson carried water for the African Americans who worked the cane fields, but he did not work the fields. Could it have been his relationship with Miss Emma and some Creole status that spared him that fate? Was his education on death row so important because he was in fact an heir to a Creole family line, with an already proud family history of valuing and achieving a certain level of status? Was Grant’s reluctance to visit and teach Jefferson viewed by these women as a kind of intolerable loss of Creole memory and pride?

Other characters provide evidence of Creole culture in rural Louisiana also. Joe and Thelma Claiborne run the bar and café called the Rainbow Club at the back of town. Gaines tells us Joe runs the bar and Thelma runs the café. The distinction seems important. “Thelma’s mouth was full of gold teeth, solid gold as well as gold crowned” (Gaines 1993, 26) whereas Joe owns a new 1948 Cadillac. The club offers good liquor, good food, has a telephone, serves iced drinks, and doesn’t turn people away because of the color line. Even the two Mulatto bricklayers are tolerated in spite of their offensive comments about Jefferson until Grant meets their challenge and fights with them, wrecking the club. Gaines tells us that in spite of their possessions the Claibornes are good people. When Grant was out of money, he could always “get a meal and pay later” (27).

There are other characters that are described in ways that signify the presence of the descendants of Creole, sometimes also called free people of color. Vivian’s colleagues at the Catholic school meet at the Rainbow Club after work for drinks and speak French as well as English in the school community. Farrell Jarreau works for the Pichot family but not as a laborer. Jarreau is a skilled craftsman whose talents are too precious to put to fieldwork. He moves around the quarters and the plantation house with more freedom than most of the other men and lives in the house across the lane from Miss Louise. He is even called Mister Jarreau at
times, as Grant is called Professor Wiggins. Reverend Ambrose has not had university studies but holds a special place in the community for his knowledge of Scripture, where faith in God and spirituality are highly valued. He reports his sense of impotence in the face of so much injustice but feels the weight of the community’s dependence upon him. And the teacher whose place Grant took describes himself as superior to any man darker than himself. “Where else could I have felt superior to so many but here?” (65), asks Matthew Antoine, as he explains to Grant why he stayed in Bayonne rather than running away to California.

After sorting through different sets of images and descriptions about characters, we returned to the question of why this line of inquiry should matter to preservice education students at the turn of the twenty-first century. One theme that emerged from discussions has to do with the continual reentrenchment of racist practices in the Deep South along the boundaries of White and Black identities. Racism continues to afford privileges to some groups while marginalizing the least privileged, in a society where the contributions of minorities have been systematically erased. Also, even as different cultural groups intensify cultural identities through diversity programs and celebrations, distinctions between cultural groups are often less than those arising from within any one group. The contradiction presses us to identify with and disassociate from those very cultural influences that limited the options that shaped the identities of our ancestors. However, racism fuels this diversification process by continuing to broaden and/or narrow one’s options according to one’s place along a color continuum, set within the context of U.S. history as that history informs the people of particular regions.

An example of this intersection of contradictory forces may be seen in the way Creoles maintain a presence in New Orleans but are generally not recognized as having contributed to Louisiana’s rural regions. Creoles moved upriver beyond New Orleans after the collapse of the tripartite sociolegal structure, into the rural central area where Ernest Gaines grew up and where his novels are set. A former student of mine brought to my attention an unpublished English honor’s thesis written by a friend of hers on this very subject. From Llorens’ work we learned about the Creole Metoyer family of the Cane River Area of West Central Louisiana and about Melrose Plantation, made famous by its owner and patron of the arts, Cammie Henry. Llorens observed in his thesis how U.S. authors treat Creole characters as characters caught in cultural turmoil. Llorens’s study of that literature produced a reading of Creole culture as one whose survival remains in question and whose recovery remains very unlikely. Llorens critiqued the same Ernest Gaines’s novel that we were studying, but he concluded that Gaines too depicted Creole culture as a culture in turmoil, unlikely to recover or even maintain itself. Gaines is viewed by Llorens as an author who chooses to identify with blackness and to frame Creole culture as irrational. We came to a different conclusion.

Participants in this study acknowledged that our work had greatly complicated our ideas about race and cultural heritage in Louisiana. Viewed not as a choice of
opposition between whiteness and blackness, race had become nearly impossible to contain in any categories, much less only two: Black and White. When asked whether the two-race category was working for us, some students spoke candidly about how different members of their immediate families passed for different “races” at different times. No discussions in the previous four years displayed the degree of candor associated with this discussion. Members of this class described how sometimes in some places they were viewed as Latina/Latino, or Black, or bright (light-skinned but not White), or White, or Mexican, and how sometimes they would negotiate these different readings as they chose. In some contexts, several students observed, race was meaningless because one’s parents, siblings, children, cousins, and grandparents might all have multiple-race options at different times. Families with this many racial identities seemed to possess fewer prohibitions against how one chose to associate with others, too. These multiple-race options amplified the kinds of racial markers the class had encountered at the start of the semester among students from the Gulf Rim. Most of these students negotiated issues of race from a middle ground between Black and White, whether they were Portuguese, Hispanic, or Francophone. Our work together had shaken out some of the silence we generally employed about matters of race, but it also clarified the insidiousness with which racism treats notions of blackness. Racism against African Americans operates as a mechanism that measures the distance on the color line between oneself and Africa. This mechanism functions by rewarding any distance that can be assessed as greater than some other. In this study, however, it became more evident to participants that the penalties associated with race are as complex and contradictory as our memories allow. As long as the color continuum remains in force, even history remains in jeopardy. Therefore, without a reliable historical record, how will we ever construct a society free of racism?

Resistance in the Novel and in Ourselves

Earlier in this essay I identified resistance to knowledge as an emergent theme in the research about cultural studies. In this study too, resistance to knowledge played an important part. Perhaps one of the most important ways that resistance served us well was in the way we were able to locate it first so clearly as an important element in Gaines’s novel and then in ourselves. Gaines illustrates well how Grant Wiggins had fallen into such a terrible despair that he had begun to resist nearly every relationship offered to him. His only real attachments were to Mr. Antoine, who repeatedly rejected him, and to Vivian, who continually sought to clarify their relationship. His attachment to Vivian seemed at times to represent an opportunity for escape rather than an opportunity to relate. He resisted facing himself, the consequences of his repeated choice to return to Bayonne, his students, his aunt, Miss Emma, and the responsibilities he would have to assume if Vivian and
her children did become his family. Resistance had led Grant to misery but it also kept him there, unwilling and unable to learn from his own experiences.

Resistance shaped others’ lives too. Jefferson resisted Grant’s efforts as much as Grant had resisted Miss Emma’s plan that he teach Jefferson. Having been convinced that the attorney spoke the truth by calling him a hog, Jefferson refused to talk or eat any of the food his godmother had prepared for him. Later he illustrates the toll the whole event has taken on him. “I’m a old hog they fattening up to kill for Christmas” (Gaines 1993, 83). He ate from the basket of food his godmother had prepared by putting his head into the bag and moving about the cell on his hands and knees. Even after he accepted the food his nannan had sent to him, Jefferson resisted the lessons his teacher awkwardly offered. Grant eventually confronted Jefferson and helped to transform his resistance.

Students credit Grant with making an important contribution to Jefferson’s struggle against despair when Grant himself suffers through the experience of borrowing money from Joe and Thelma Claiborne, because he wanted to bring the radio to the jail the same day he and Jefferson had discussed it, and buying the little twenty-dollar Philco at Edwin’s store, one of the local, White-owned stores. Grant is not charged for the beer Joe gives him and is given nearly eight dollars as well, five from Joe and several from the men who are regulars at the end of bar. Joe signals for Grant to go to Thelma’s café, on the other side of the building, where Thelma hears his request about borrowing money for the radio and gives Grant a plateful of food and ten dollars. Without intending to do so, Grant draws a loving community into his relationship with Jefferson. The solidarity Grant experienced at the Rainbow Club prepares him for the difficulty he faces at Edwin’s store in town. Grant is perceived by students as stronger in this scene than he was up to this point in the novel. Rather than relying on a sterile curriculum of reading and writing, Grant finally reaches out to Jefferson in a way that can bring Jefferson the same kind of pleasure and diversion that even Grant needs. He promises Jefferson access to the world of Randy’s Record Shop, late at night, a radio station that plays the blues.

At the store, Grant has to insist on a new radio, one still in a box, rather than the display model that has been handled by shoppers. He perseveres in this insistence and the experience is both distressing and satisfying. Students voiced surprise that Grant was able to pull this off. He had become angry and even rude in other situations, and in the fight at the Rainbow Club, Grant’s violence is costly to many people. In his effort to bring Jefferson the gift of a new radio, however, he collects strength from the community first and then faces the indignities of his treatment by the salesclerk with a calm determination. Most students interpreted the gift of the radio as an event that reunited Jefferson with his own cultural heritage. Paul Bonin delivers the radio to Jefferson the same evening Grant borrows the money, makes the purchase, and brings it back to the jail. As the blues fill Jefferson’s cell day in and day out, Jefferson’s manhood is restored. Where he had identified a gallon of
ice cream as his last meal of choice just before he and Grant talked about music for the first time, Jefferson’s interest in life is broadened and deepened by what he hears from places beyond the boundaries of the small community in which he has spent his life to that point.

Jefferson receives the gift and is transformed by the actual and symbolic meanings that the gift represents. The radio opens his small world onto a much larger world geographically, because he can tune in radio stations from Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Nashville, and Del Rio, Texas. The music moves him and he feels an immense range of emotions, including joy and sadness, loneliness, and a sense of connection. Over several weeks, Jefferson integrates what he feels into the tragic opportunity with which he himself is faced. He chooses to be in relationship with others rather than remain isolated in despair. Jefferson’s choice is not the choice of a single moment. Once he makes this choice, he must make it over and over and over again. The decision transforms him. He becomes the hero whose journey will take him through his own death and into the resurrection his community will experience through him.

Jefferson’s execution date is set for April 8, which in that spring fell on the second Friday after Easter. His time of execution is set for sometime between noon and three. One student in this class observed that we often place our emphasis on the death side of Lent and Easter, and that the Catholic Creole community of Bayonne may also have forgotten the power of the Resurrection part of the Easter story. The officials in the governor’s office had mentioned their hesitation to execute Jefferson right before Easter, but they seemed to have discounted the connections people might make between Jefferson and a resurrected savior. The community remembers Joe Louis and celebrates Jackie Robinson, but these role models have not served well people like Reverend Ambrose, Mr. Antoine, and Grant, in whom the community had placed its hopes. Sometimes transformation must be experienced first and put into words later. Interestingly, students observed, the experience of Jefferson’s death with dignity contributed more to Grant’s transformation than anything that Grant was ever able to do for himself or anyone about whom he cared.

Participants in the class raised questions about why Gaines presents Jefferson’s diary to the readers of the novel two chapters before Grant reads it for the first time. Generally, it was concluded, Grant was not ready to witness Jefferson’s transformation. He would have seen the diary before Jefferson’s death as a poor attempt to write standard edited English. Grant was described by one student’s essay as a teacher who was “hung up” with the low performance of the Black students compared to the performance of White students. Did Vivian’s children and the children at the Catholic school perform at some intermediate level between the White children in the local public school and the children in the quarters? Was the Catholic school able to negotiate the intersecting influences of race and class and nurture students into high academic achievements? We were unable to determine the an-
swer but we were inclined to believe that the children at the Catholic school were probably attending the full school year, rather than three months fewer than the White children, and were probably supplied with resources in ways that made the Catholic school more like the school for White children in town than like the quarters school. Had Jefferson attended the Catholic school as a child, he might have developed strong literary talents. The quality of his composed thoughts suggests this could have been possible. However, even though this remnant element of the three-race society privileged some people of color who could leverage economic influence, it was unable to disassemble the profoundly racist boundary between all people of color and Whites. The struggle to become “as white as possible” along the color continuum threatened everyone in the community with complicity. It is in light of these implications that the finale of the novel may be so important.

Participants of this study struggled to make sense of the way Gaines concluded the novel. Students acknowledged that chapter twenty-nine, which is Jefferson’s diary, was difficult to read and to interpret. Jefferson struggles in his conversion of basic phonemes into written form, misspelling most words and portraying written language in the style of oral language. Students’ predisposition was to skim the chapter. Some students explained that they felt embarrassed for Jefferson when they saw his written words. As an oral account, however, the diary is a powerful and poetic text. When we read sections of the diary aloud, we were able to move away from the hypercritical assessment of it in terms of standard, edited English. Jefferson’s literacy skills were inadequate to the task at hand, but the man himself was more than equal to the challenges he faced. That is one of the insights that Ernest Gaines’s novel produced for us as teacher-readers.

Considered in light of these two important distinctions between the literacy competencies of the man and the man himself, the scene that concludes the novel resonates with powerful implications. Paul Bonin brings the diary to Grant and presents it to him after Jefferson’s death. Grant needed the full measure of real and symbolic meanings associated with Jefferson’s death in order for the diary to speak to him not as a poorly written document but as the good news it signified for all those who placed themselves and would place themselves in relationship to Jefferson. Though executed, Jefferson would remain alive and accessible in this community and beyond through the stories that would be told about him, just as the community told their stories of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson. Regarding Jefferson, however, these stories would be about one of their very own, a young man from the quarters.

Students noted that Paul Bonin had never attended to a prisoner on death row before, nor had he ever witnessed an execution. Also, he had warned Grant during one of their first visits to the jail that he had no intentions of getting too close to Jefferson because he had been told that doing so would not be a good thing to do. And yet, Bonin, not Grant, attends to Jefferson in his final hours. Jefferson calls Paul Bonin by his first name and asks him if he is going to be there with him during the
Bonin offers Jefferson assurance and tends to his needs in a way that suggests he has in fact entered into an important relationship with Jefferson. When he arrives at the quarters school to give Grant the news and the diary, Bonin acknowledges that he has never been to the quarters before. He enters the quarters to bring the news about Jefferson. He explains that he considers it an honor to bring the diary to Grant and to tell the story of Jefferson’s heroic death. Bonin credits Grant with having taught Jefferson how to become a man. “You’re one great teacher, Grant Wiggins…. I saw the transformation…. I’m a witness to that” (Gaines 1993, 254). Grant is unable to recognize himself as the man Paul Bonin sees. “I didn’t do it….Maybe he did it himself” (254). Bonin is unwilling to accept the assessment that Grant offers about himself. In this exchange, Bonin asserts his own belief in Grant’s abilities as a teacher and in the power of Jefferson as a hero.

Gaines concludes the novel with a long conversation between Grant and Paul, during which Grant invites Paul to come to the school one day to tell the story of Jefferson to the children. For the participants of this study, the significance of that ending was not lost. The end of the novel does not return readers to Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, Vivian, or any of the other characters that worked their way through the terrible months of Jefferson’s incarceration. The novel ends with a teacher returning to an underresourced classroom in a school system that is corrupt and disinterested in the welfare of its students and teachers. The novel ends with a commitment of friendship between two men whose places in a racist society make it very unlikely that they will be able to be good friends without a conscientious effort on both of their parts. It ends with a White deputy, whose job placed him at the execution of an innocent Black man, asking an educated African American teacher of poor Black children, “Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins” (Gaines 1993, 255). And in its final moment, the novel ends with Grant Wiggins returning in tears to the schoolroom where he has left the children he has so often abused. Jefferson’s death and resurrection has already begun to transform the community. Grant’s ability to cry in front of the children is evidence of that.

Like the first lines of the novel, the last lines are presented in the voice of Grant Wiggins. “I was crying” (256). In another way, however, the first and last lines speak for the reader, at least many of the readers in this study made that observation. Gaines’s novel is a particular and a universal story. It is set in the 1940s but describes the challenges that face us in this new century still. To transform a society characterized by institutionalized racism will require each of us to make difficult choices about which we may have few guarantees. Students were encouraged by the fact that neither Grant nor Paul can anticipate what lies ahead of them as they decide to stand with one another as friends. Neither man has been provided with an accurate record about their shared history in Louisiana. We see, however, that their commitment to friendship is made with sincerity, and in light of that we raised some final questions. Can friendship between two people leverage a transformation of the community? Do the experiences associated with Jefferson’s life
and death provide some entry into a different way of thinking about history? Can an analysis of historical erasures contribute something important to efforts to recreate society differently?

Implications

In the United States, we still draw our greatest numbers of teachers from the White, middle class, female population. Ill informed about many of the contradictions and historical erasures associated with race and in large measure still expected to behave in relatively passive but well-intentioned ways, university students in teacher education programs are ill prepared for the kinds of cultural turmoil that await them in many of our culturally complex school systems. In this study, participants were challenged to respond to Ernest Gaines’s claim that he became a writer because there were so few accounts of his people in U.S. literature. When we asked again and again, “Who are Ernest Gaines’s people?” we found ourselves moving closer and closer to an answer we have only begun to imagine. It is, however, a question we answer with our lives every day. It was my observation that participants in this study were better prepared to work with and challenge their own assumptive worlds than students had been able to do in any previous class. I accept as one of the limitations of this study, however, the realization that I do not know if this better preparation for rethinking our assumptive worlds will translate into a better preparation for teaching. It is quite possible that some of us will elect to reentrench ourselves in former beliefs, perhaps with even greater force. However, it is also possible that we engaged with one another and the work of Ernest Gaines in ways that may prepare us for the difficulties of transforming U.S. society in the years to come. Many students expressed a sincere desire to do so.

References


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