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A Breed Between: Racial Mediation in the Fiction of Ernest Gaines

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By addressing the Cajun-African American conflict in Of Love and Dust (1967) and A Gathering of Old Men (1983), Ernest Gaines emphasizes the interdependence of white and African American people in Louisiana while simultaneously acknowledging social structures that maintain the concept of white superiority. His fiction depicts a complex racial hierarchy; Cajuns’ “white” identity remains complicated to some degree because of popular notions of Cajuns as lower-class and, implicitly, less white in the minds of the wealthy landowners and their African American workers. As such, Gaines places the Cajun between the Creole landowners and the African American laborers. Situated socially between wealthy white and working-class African Americans, Gaines portrays Cajuns as possible racial intermediaries who can be manipulated by whites to control blacks but who present some hope of racial mediation between whites and blacks. Simultaneously, Gaines’s African American protagonists not only realize their own individual worth in the midst of Louisiana’s racial conflict, but also realize the individual humanity of their Cajun neighbors. This mutual understanding remains central to Gaines’s ultimate message of racial mediation as the key to achieving human equality and true manhood.

In Louisiana, cultural and social categories are often complicated by the interdependence and overlapping of various racial communities that deny simple boundaries. Although geographically part of the Deep South, Louisiana includes its own unique

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racial and ethnic categories. As Barbara Ladd explains, “Prior to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, racial classification in the creole Deep South was much more complex than in the Anglo Upper South, where the status of a mixed-blood child followed that of the mother” (21). This difference extended from the fact that children of “European colonists and African women constituted a separate caste,” as demonstrated by New Orleans’s free persons of color population (21). Miscegenation complicated racial divisions and testified to their arbitrary nature all over the South, but Louisiana society included a legal and economic space for these intermediary figures, which further tested the boundaries of difference. In this complex categorization, the Cajuns also arose as racial intermediaries who fell between categories because of their history of difference and ridicule and because of their culturally-determined white identity.

One can better understand Louisiana’s unique social stratification by defining certain terms, such as Creole and Cajun. Historically, Creole has shifted from referring to a person born in colonial Louisiana, regardless of race, to a racial signifier (Dormon, Creoles x). While Creole has been used to refer to Louisiana colonists and to demarcate racial communities, Gaines uses the term as a class marker, referring to white landowners. He explains how “the big house” of the plantation was “owned by the Creoles,” which in this context refers to the “white” population of Creole descendants who are in positions of social and economic power (Gaudet and Wooton 228).

Cajuns present another example of social and cultural interdependence and complexity in Louisiana. Gaines explains that during his childhood the people of the quarters thought of a Cajun as “a white who would give them hell on False River. . . . And anytime there was a problem on the river, and because so many of the whites there were Cajun, it would always be ‘that Cajun,’ whether one them was involved or not” (Gaudet and Wooton 83). Although the definition of Cajun in Gaines’s past generally included white, French-speaking people, the history of how Cajuns came to form an ethnic community in Louisiana is much more complicated. Following the 1755 expulsion from Acadia (current day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) by the British governor Charles Lawrence, many Acadians searched for a new
homeland. By 1764, they had begun to settle in Louisiana, and the changes wrought by new environmental conditions and government policies produced a people now known as Cajuns, a group made up of particles of various cultures, including black Creole, Spanish, German, Creole French, American Indian, and even Anglo American (Ancelet 33-34). In the simplest of terms, Cajuns are the descendants of the Acadians, though there are people of non-Acadian descent who also identify themselves as Cajun today because they or an ancestor married into a Cajun family or because they live in close proximity to Cajun communities and adapt their cultural ways.

Although a number of Acadians settled in Louisiana, their new homeland did not always accept them unconditionally. In fact, the use of Cajun today stems from the notion of this unique Louisiana population as different from mainstream Americans during the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. According to James Dormon, the term Cajun “suggests that it was employed by outsiders, not insiders, for it is fundamentally an anglicized form of the contraction ’Cadien’ (or phonetically, ‘Ca’jin’), long in use among the French Acadians to refer to themselves. ‘Cajun’ is an Americanized form of the term” (italics mine, The People 33), a term, which according to Carl Brasseaux, signified “white trash” (Acadian to Cajun 104). Ironically, Cajuns now take pride in an American-made term used to label themselves. Along with this American-made label, Americans also determined the racial status of Cajuns in the complex world of interethnic Louisiana, making the claim of “white” identity a cultural, as well as a racial, construct. This racial identification signified Cajun power over African Americans and opened the way for economic opportunities not offered to the Louisiana black population, which Gaines demonstrates in his fictional representations of Louisiana life.

The economic and social structures that maintained racial containment in Louisiana were arbitrarily constructed, especially because of Louisiana’s often overlapping cultural divisions. This overlap made racial mediation more difficult because the spaces between constructed racial categories were maintained by wealthy whites who placed Cajuns between themselves and their African American laborers, a placement that empowered Cajuns while also maintaining social and economic control by these wealthy whites.
over both Cajuns and African Americans. Such social constructions occurred throughout the United States. In Noel Ignatiev’s study of Irish immigrants and their identity as white Americans, he argues that “the abolition of slavery called into question the existence of the white race as a social formation” because the absolute distinction between the “‘white’ worker and the black worker were erased” (164). In order to maintain not only their African American work force, but also their control over the poorer white communities who no longer felt a common bond through the racially constructed slave system, the elite white Americans determined who could be identified as “white” (65). By doing so, the wealthy white class could and did use such power to construct a larger distance between themselves and their African American laborers.

Gaines captures some of this complexity through his portrayal of the Cajun position below the wealthy white Creoles but above African Americans: “I’ve lived in that interracial, or ethnic, mixture of the Cajun, and the big house owned by the Creoles—not Cajuns, but Creoles—and the blacks” (Lowe 228). In “Creole and Singalese,” Joseph Griffin reiterates Gaines’s statement concerning Louisiana hierarchy: “Gaines has a pervasive concern with the stratification of groups within the white Louisiana society, specifically the subordination of Cajuns by the wealthy whites of French or Anglo-Saxon origin who own the land and maintain the racial code of the South” (30). Gaines’s portrayal of Louisiana’s racial tensions stems from his own understanding of the social hierarchy that places Cajuns in between wealthy white landowners and African American laborers, making them definitely not black but only marginally white. Fred Hobson argues that Gaines “por[trays] Cajun characters as sensitively as he portrays black ones, realizing that the hot-blooded Cajun who was shot and killed [in A Gathering of Old Men] suffered from a similar inferiority to the landowner whites of English descent who viewed both blacks and Cajuns as if they were ‘a breed beyond you’” (96). Displaying his personal realization of the means by which class structure allowed for and promoted racial conflict by positing the lower-class Cajun against the laboring African American, Gaines captures a more complete picture of how class and race enforce social control in Louisiana, a type of control that can be denied only
when and if both African Americans and Cajuns can view the other not in terms of racial or class categories, but as individuals.

Of Love and Race

*Of Love and Dust* captures the tensions that existed between Cajuns and African Americans during the 1940s. In this novel, Gaines relates the story of a young African American, Marcus Payne, who killed another man in a knife fight and who agrees to work on Marshall Hebert’s plantation as punishment for his crime. On the plantation he refuses to be broken by Sydney Bonbon, the Cajun overseer. While Gaines depicts a growing relationship between Bonbon and Jim Kelly, an African American plantation worker, as evidence of racial mediation, he also writes of a constant tension between Marcus and Bonbon who both fall in love with women of the opposite race. Aware of this tension, Hebert pits the two men against each other in order to rid himself of both, demonstrating the landowner’s position of power over Cajuns and African Americans. Although the story focuses on racial tension, it also depicts the development of Jim Kelly into full manhood because he acknowledges the humanity of both Bonbon and Marcus, but only after he rebels against the white social structure under which he has lived most of his life.

The tension that exists between the African American and Cajun communities in the novel is compounded by Marcus’s refutation of Cajuns’ “white” identification. In an earlier version of the novel, Marcus confronts Hebert with the inferiority of Cajuns, insolently saying, “He ain’t a solid White man, he’s a Cajun. . . . You think he’s the same kind of White man you is?” (EGC Box 3-27, 277). While this statement proves Marcus’s belief that Cajuns are inferior to the white landowners, and possibly to African Americans as well, Gaines removed it from the final draft of the novel, probably because it was too dangerous a line to be spoken by any African American to a white man in the 1940s South.

Regardless of his ability to deny Bonbon’s assumed superiority over him, Marcus cannot overcome either Hebert’s powerful maintenance of social and racial boundaries or Bonbon’s whiteness, which allows for the murder of Marcus without prosecution. Society has dictated the actions of Marcus and Bonbon, and as
such it is as responsible for Marcus’s murder as Bonbon is. Gaines has even explained, “As far as Bonbon goes. . . I think I state in the story that Bonbon was determined by society and his environment” (Lowe 34). In order to initiate any racial mediation in the novel, Marcus, Bonbon, and Jim would have to deny society’s control over their actions by acknowledging the individuality of the others, a potential happy ending refuted by the social and racial climate of 1940s America.

Regardless of the relationship between blacks and Cajuns in Of Love and Dust, some mores are absolute. Early in the novel, Jim explains that “The Cajuns has the front-est and the best land and the colored people (those who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land” (OL and D 26). When they divided up their land to rent to sharecroppers, white landowners chose to bestow certain plots of land to specific, socially-constructed races. In doing so, they guaranteed a fierce competition between the Cajuns and the blacks even as they exploited both. Of Love and Dust further addresses segregation and the competition it endorsed by portraying the Jim Crow practice of “White Only” areas: “if you were a white man you could drink a beer in [the store], but if you were colored you had to go to a little side room—‘the nigger room’” (43). Again, this artificially constructed and arbitrarily enforced policy promoted tension between Cajuns and blacks, and blacks and whites, because both were working together on the plantation lands. Although it is more than possible that Cajuns approved of these rules, the Cajuns of whom Gaines writes were not part of the governing body, but tools used by this body that produced the laws in the first place and that promoted Cajun power over African Americans.

Societal rules dictate a defined boundary that encloses both races in a strict manner. Jim’s story refutes this belief, however, because he admits his sympathy for Bonbon, although this sympathy is severely tested by Marcus’s murder. Jim perceives Bonbon’s realization of the corruption and manipulation of the blacks by the white society. Bonbon even tells him, “They had it rigged. There, they got me working that boy out there and they laughing at me behind my back. They make me the fool” (OL and D 258). Bonbon also acknowledges that there is nothing either Marcus or Bonbon can do about it: “Me and you—what we is? We little people,
Geam. They make us do what they want us to do, and they tell us nothing. We don’t have nothing to say ‘bout it, do we, Geam?” (258). Bonbon’s voluntary comments to Jim regarding the power of the wealthy landowners can be viewed as both his attempt to address Jim as an individual and his impulse to rebel against white superiority as held by Hebert.

In an earlier draft of the story, Jim also attempts to consider the Cajun as an individual with personal feelings when he admits his sympathy for “Bon Bon,” Gaines’s original rendering of the Cajun’s name: “Poor Bon Bon, . . . he was the one I felt the most pity for, I really meant it” (EGC, Box 3-27, 328). Jim continues, “He had been told that ever since the day he was born. ‘You White, Sidney. . . . And no matter how you sink, you will always be above a nigger—because you White’” (329). Gaines revises Jim’s original sympathy for the Cajun overseer by making such a connection more vulnerable to the white power structure under which Jim lives. After all, Jim may recognize Bonbon’s individual humanity, but he continues to witness the abuse of African Americans by the hands of the overseer, such as Bonbon’s attempt to break Marcus. Bonbon’s actions build a barrier between himself and Jim, regardless of their vulnerable connection.

Jim’s conversations with Bonbon make the possibility of a bond between a white and a black man evident because it alludes to the possibility of mutual friendship and consideration. By addressing each other as individuals, Bonbon and Jim can begin to break from social categories in order to bridge the racial gap between them. Through his own social and racial placement between Hebert and Jim, Bonbon understands Jim’s entrapment by white society. Jim simultaneously acknowledges Bonbon’s limited power due to social controls. In the end, Gaines denies the connection in his final version of the novel, just as society denied the friendship in reality in 1940s Louisiana because, for personal or cultural reasons, Bonbon does not choose to rebel completely against the society in which he lives, as demonstrated throughout the novel.

A bond could form between Cajuns and African Americans only when and if both sides acknowledge the full humanity of the other. Furthermore, Bonbon is capable of forming this bond because of his marginally white position. It is Jim, however, who rebels against white categorization through his ability to view
Bonbon as an individual and through his realization of his own humanity. As he begins to see his Cajun neighbor as a man apart from the white community, Jim also begins to realize the artificially-contrived underpinnings of Louisiana race relations. He understands Bonbon’s complicated social position, and he speaks openly to the reader about Bonbon’s flaws. He is not afraid to relate Bonbon’s patois: “My name is James Kelly, but Bonbon couldn’t say James. He called me Geam. He was the only man, white or black, who called me Geam” (OL and D 5). As the closest thing to Bonbon’s confidante, Jim also witnesses Bonbon’s human love of and devotion to Pauline, a black woman on the Hebert plantation, a relationship which places Bonbon in a vulnerable position among his Cajun people. Meanwhile, Jim also acts as a type of guardian for Marcus whose aunt Julie Rand asks Jim to “[l]ook after Marcus up there” (11), even though he realizes, as Gaines emphasizes in an interview, that Marcus will never surrender to white control, “especially when this authority is given out by a Cajun whom he considers white trash” (Lowe 6).

Jim’s acceptance of his place has led to some negative criticism to which Gaines has responded: “Some of the younger blacks have criticized Jim as being an Uncle Tom, but I had to get a guy who could communicate with different sides, with the most conservative as well as the most radical and militant. And all through this, he must be able to learn to love, to try to understand” (Lowe 107). He must learn how to be a proud, black man, which according to Gaines means being “[r]esponsible to one’s self and to one’s world,” including all humanity (qtd. in Fuller 3). He must learn his own individual worth and the worth of others, whether white or black.

Although Bonbon and Jim leave each other in a tense moment, they still take with them certain lessons. For Jim, this lesson pertains to his ability to stand up to the white community and to deny their arbitrary categories. He chooses to leave Hebert and to leave the ugliness of the plantation behind as he begins his journey to personal freedom, a journey made possible through his relationships with the rebellious Marcus and the lonely, marginalized Bonbon. The Cajun chooses to escape his Cajun community and to remain with Pauline, sharing an interracial relationship that teaches Bonbon that love can cross racial boundaries.
Of Love and Dust also documents the complicated reality of love across racial boundaries as a form of racial mediation. Throughout the novel, Jim relates the history of Bonbon’s love affair with Pauline. Jim recalls Bonbon’s way of taking any black female worker before he met Pauline. “But something happened to Bonbon. At first he had laid with all and any of them. When his lust was up he had called the one closest to him. But after being with so many, now he settled for one” (OL and D 62). Bonbon does not view the African American female workers as individuals but as objects to be used, as is his right as a white male during this era. Then he falls in love with Pauline and begins to see her as a woman. At first Bonbon falls in love with Pauline unilaterally, but after a time, she falls in love with him, too: “After so many years, Pauline did fall in love with Bonbon. She couldn’t help but fall in love with him. She knew he loved her more than he did his wife up the quarter or his people who lived on the river” (66). This love that crosses boundaries and breaks social conventions cannot survive on the plantation in Louisiana because love is denied between the races, even if sexual relations between the races were not only accepted, but also viewed as a means of control. According to Jim, Bonbon used sex as a power tool until he fell in love with Pauline. Gaines portrays the reality and the sincerity of this interracial love, one more real than the love that exists between husband and wife.

At the end of the novel, Bonbon and Pauline meet again and live together outside the borders controlled by his Cajun family and by Hebert. Bonbon uses his racial and social position to reach across the racial gap for Pauline, even if he chooses not to do so for Marcus. By escaping the plantation, the two lovers acknowledge white society’s rules while denying its direct power over their love for each other, sending another powerful message to Jim that individuality can defeat racial assumptions to some degree. Bonbon’s bond with Jim may have even provided him with the realization that connections can form across racial boundaries, which may have opened him to his growing feelings for Pauline. Simultaneously, this love may have also become Bonbon’s means of acknowledging Jim’s humanity by potentially bridging the racial gap enforced by the wealthy white landowners.
Unlike Jim, Marcus refuses to acknowledge Bonbon as an individual because he views Cajuns as inferior. Believing in his rampant sexuality and its power over women, Marcus first attempts to draw Pauline away from Bonbon. After all, “How could a white man—no, not even a solid white man, but a bayou, catfish-eating Cajun—compete with him when it came down to loving?” (OL and D 57). Even if he cannot fight Bonbon directly on the work fields, Marcus denies the Cajun power over him by claiming to be more sexually potent, an area that, to him, confirms his manhood. He also refuses to view Bonbon as superior to him because of Bonbon’s Cajun, thus lower-class and vulnerable white, identity. Unfortunately, Marcus does not realize or understand the love between Pauline and Bonbon until Pauline firmly rejects his advances. Upon this rejection, Marcus forms a new plan: to make Louise Bonbon, Sydney’s wife and a white woman, fall in love with him. Marcus succeeds not only in making Louise love him but also in falling in love himself. Marcus’s love for Louise seems to exist beyond his notions of race and class because he does not disparage her ethnic identity as he does her husband’s. Both of these interracial couples represent the possibility of love and acceptance regardless of racial notions of superiority and inferiority constructed by those in power. Although both affairs reflect popular historical notions of racial-sexual politics, Gaines frames them as sincere, perhaps to subvert and to deny previous stereotypes.

This illicit love on the part of both couples forces the conclusion of the novel since Bonbon must take a stand against Marcus in order to “save face” and his own life. If he does not, then, as he knows, his own people will come after him because, as Jim says, “this is the South, and the South ain’t go’n let no nigger run away with no white woman and let that white husband walk around here scot-free. Not the South” (OL and D 224). Gaines again depicts Jim’s comprehension of Bonbon’s difficult position because, in some sense, Jim’s words stem from a personal connection with Bonbon, no matter how fragile. Jim’s narration of the situation also demonstrates Jim’s growing selfhood as he not only witnesses, but also analyzes, the situation. Hebert does not control Jim in the end because Jim has become capable of making such connections.
Marshall Hebert, the Creole or ‘genteel Acadian’ landowner, witnesses the tension between Marcus and Bonbon. Hebert attempts to bribe Marcus with freedom if he kills Bonbon for him, demonstrating that Bonbon is disposable in the mind of the aristocratic landowner. Marcus, however, refuses to be a “hunting dog to go round killing people for nobody else” (OL and D 197). Jim fully comprehends the situation and thinks to himself,

“Marshall was too big. If it was just Bonbon who wanted to hurt Marcus, you might be able to prevent that. Bonbon was nothing but a poor white man, and sometimes you could go to the rich white man for help. But where did you go when it was a rich white man?” (198)

Bonbon’s words to Jim about the “little people” who have “nothing to say ‘bout it,” also reflect the dangerous situation Hebert manipulates for Marcus and Bonbon (258). “Because Bonbon own people’ll kill him if he don’t” kill Marcus for trying to run away with his wife (224), Hebert realizes that setting the two men against each other would solve all of his problems. By murdering for him years earlier, Bonbon gained leverage over Hebert. By orchestrating Marcus’s murder at Bonbon’s hand, Hebert neutralizes Bonbon’s influence and cements his superiority. For this reason, Jim reads the situation as a set up that benefits Marshall Hebert. Regardless, Bonbon kills Marcus and is forced to move away from Hebert’s land.

In the original version of the story, Gaines even had Marcus and Louise escape (Babb 214), a happily-ever-after that simply was not possible or realistic in 1940s Louisiana because white society would not allow a Cajun woman and an African American man, regardless of their sincere feelings for each other, to escape the political and racial implications of their love. This love threatened the white system of control, and, thus, had to be silenced. Gaines revised the ending because it did not match the tragic tone of the first part of the novel that explicitly details the racial cruelty still thriving at this time in history. The possibility of a happy ending, however, proves Gaines’s need to make a larger statement about racial mediation and human equality, regardless of the reality of any situation or time period. By acknowledging love that rebels against and denies strict social and racial divisions, Gaines argues
for love over violence, a love that can see and feel past social
dictation and skin color. Violence, however, wins out in the end.

Although Bonbon tells Jim that he did not want to kill Marcus,
his marginal place within the boundaries of white society frees him
from any legal responsibility for Marcus’s death: “There wasn’t a
trial, there was a hearing. Bonbon got off with justifiable homi-
cide,” after the story was completely changed to suit the white
men’s purposes (OL and D 277). This injustice illustrates the
Cajuns’ place in white America and white America’s rejection of
equality for African Americans. Bonbon visits Jim to explain the
situation and his realization that Hebert constructed the whole
situation:

He told me he didn’t want to fight Marcus, he was hoping Marcus
would run from him. If Marcus had made any attempt to run, he
would have let him go, and there wouldn’t have been a thing said
about it. But when Marcus didn’t run, he had to fight him. Not just
fight him, but he had to kill him. If he didn’t kill Marcus, he would
have been killed himself. The Cajuns on the river would have done
that. (277)

Instead of filtering Bonbon’s words through Jim’s narration,
Gaines has Bonbon speak for himself in an earlier draft. In fact, in
the earlier version Bonbon even tells Jim, “You’re my friend”
(EGC, Box 3-9). By giving Jim the power to interpret the Cajun’s
words in the published version, Gaines allows Jim a more devel-
oped sense of self-pride and control. He no longer answers to white
society and its dictates. Jim responds with no pity or understand-
ing, and “[Bonbon] saw this in [Jim’s] face and [Jim] could see
how it hurt him” (OL and D 278). Gaines has said that, “All [Jim]
is trying to say is that there’s got to be some kind of balance
between these two people, because they won’t ever come together
unless there’s somebody more in the middle to sort of bring them
closer together” (Lowe 127).

Of Love and Dust admits the need for this balance, but refuses
to allow its existence because Bonbon does not have the strength
or courage to rebel completely against his Cajun family or the
larger white community. Just as Bonbon believes that he must
follow the dictates of his community, so must Jim answer to the
pride and dignity of his own. When Bonbon chooses to kill Mar-
cus, hope for racial mediation between Bonbon and Jim is weakened. Furthermore, this violence encourages Jim to rebel even more against any notion of self-inferiority because he refuses to passively accept such actions against his community. And so Gaines concludes the novel with the crushed possibility of white and black friendship, due not to failure of the individual men forming the bond but to the society that overpowers these men. Although the novel hints at the possibility of such interaction between the races, 1940s Louisiana refused to accept such a connection because it would threaten white control over both Cajuns and African Americans.

This novel is as much about Jim’s development as it is about interracial love and life in the quarters. When Marcus first meets Jim, he calls him a “whitemouth,” meaning one who answers to the white man (OL and D 6). After spending two weeks trying to teach Marcus how to bow to the system, Jim discovers that Marcus has taught him how to refute the system, a lesson he exemplifies when he denies Marshall Hebert’s recommendation letter and decides to leave the plantation for good, finally answering only to himself, and thus empowering himself (278). During his final moment with Aunt Margaret, Bonbon’s housekeeper and one of the old women of the quarters, Jim testifies that he will never forget what Hebert set in motion, that Hebert “killed Marcus; Bonbon didn’t” (OL and D 279). Jim knows how society works because of his relationship with Bonbon. Bonbon’s complicated social position becomes Jim’s bridge across the racial divide. By repeating the story to the reader, Jim confirms his promise; we are reading his remembering of his lesson of courage and pride, of his personal development as an individual (73).

A Gathering of Old [White and Black] Men

A Gathering of Old Men continues Gaines’s depiction of the tension between African Americans and Cajuns in Louisiana. Set in the late 1970s, it also addresses the changes that have occurred in Louisiana since the 1940s, changes that now make it possible for a Cajun to voice the need for balance, and for African Americans to stand up against the social system that has trapped them for so long.
While working for and with Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer, Charlie, an African American man, finally refuses to allow Beau to physically punish him anymore. Charlie defends himself with a shotgun, and the African American community on the plantation has to face the consequences of this murder. Although Charlie has been raised by Mathu, a courageous African American who refuses to act inferior to any white person, Charlie lacks the bravery needed to face his crime and punishment. He runs away only to return to face the truth and to become a man capable of standing up for himself at the end of the novel. Meanwhile, the old men of the quarters finally gain the strength to stand up against white oppression through their attempt to protect Mathu, the assumed killer, by standing with him.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the story of Beau Boutan’s death evolves into the story of the African American men’s growing pride in themselves as they finally realize that “Now is their chance to stand” (*Gathering* 18). They realize that the death of the Cajun means Fix, Beau’s father, will be “coming with his drove” (9). Everything changes, however, when Beau’s brother Gilbert Boutan, or “Salt” to his football fans, arrives at his father’s house. While the old men find the courage to take their stand against racial oppression and injustice, the Cajun family at the center of the novel also addresses cultural change as education and football replace race as the central focus of the younger generations’ lives.

To underscore the risk the African American men take in opposing the Boutans, Gaines emphasizes the fact that, even in the 1970s, civil rights had not come to Bayonne and that a black man who killed a white man could expect to be lynched. Early in the novel, we are told that Beau had a father who was infamous for his cruel actions against his black neighbors; as one of the old men says, “There’s not a black family in this parish Fix and his crowd hasn’t hurt sometime or other” (*Gathering* 18). At times in the novel, it is unclear whether Fix was responsible for the wrongdoings or not, but the people have long reconciled their memories to Fix’s identity as evil. At one point, Mapes, the local sheriff, even reminds a particular character that the crime he accuses Fix of committing was actually committed by a “Sicilian, not Cajun,” explaining that it “had nothing to do with Fix” (107). When asked about the blaming of Cajuns for black suffering in his own experi-
ence, Gaines explained in a way that parallels his characters’ naming Fix whenever trouble arose: “You find a scapegoat. You’ve got to find a scapegoat. And in the case of the people where I come from, if the scapegoat was white, then he was a Cajun. That’s all there is to it, whether he was a Cajun or not” (Lowe 123). Although some of the men gathered around Mathu’s porch were witnesses to Fix’s actions against blacks, Fix and his family become the scapegoat for all cruelties the blacks faced in this novel because of their position in between the wealthy white landowners and the African American laborers, which makes them more convenient and less dangerous to blame. Moreover, Fix and his family also become victims, to a lesser degree, of progress and machinery. As Mapes warns the old men, “Then you blaming the wrong person. He’s as much victim of these times as you are. That’s why he’s back on that bayou now, because they took that river from him, too” (108).

The competition between Cajuns and blacks on the Marshall plantation originated when the best lands were rented to Beau Boutan because of his socially-determined “whiteness,” which frustrated and angered the black population whose families had built the plantation over a hundred years before:

Beau Boutan was leasing the plantation from the Marshall family. Beau and his family had been leasing the land the past twenty-five, thirty years. The very same land we [the African Americans] had worked, our people had worked, our people’s people had worked since the time of slavery. Now Mr. Beau had it all. (Gathering 43)

Gaines demonstrates the Cajuns’ social position by placing them above African Americans in the community’s racial hierarchy but below the wealthy whites. Beatrice Marshall, the white plantation mistress, demonstrates aristocratic white attitudes toward Cajuns by saying, “I don’t like [Fix]. I’ve never liked him. Why we ever let that kind on this land, I don’t know” (23). Miss Bea displays her own intolerance when she exclaims, “About time [Candy] shot one of them Cajuns, messing up the land with those tractors” (23). The novel’s plot, therefore, concerns the tension between working-class Cajuns and working-class blacks, but Gaines ultimately condemns the white landowners who manipulate tension between Cajuns and blacks for their own advantage. Much like Hebert in Of
Love and Dust, the Marshall family views Cajuns as lower-class, inferior people who have become a tool for keeping the African American laborers away from positions of power, or even equality. In other words, the Cajun community acts as a buffer that protects white society from any threat from the black community they control. At the same time, these Cajun neighbors also remain part of the inferior population that the wealthy whites attempt to control through economic and political means.

To demonstrate the complexity of racial and social stratification in Louisiana, Gaines interweaves the stories of Cajuns in Bayonne with the stories of the old men. Inverting the ordinary state of racial antagonism, in this case, Beau’s murder, the Cajuns are victims of violence at the hands of the blacks. When Gilbert Boutan returns to Bayonne, he first encounters Candy Marshall, the white plantation owner’s niece, and the old men sitting around and on Mathu’s porch. Gil confronts Candy with her assumed superiority over Cajuns: “You never liked any of us. Looking at us as if we’re a breed below you. But we’re not, Candy. We’re all made of the same bone, the same blood, the same skin. Your folks had a break, mine didn’t, that’s all” (Gathering 122). This statement captures the class stratification in Louisiana that supported the racial divisions that run the Marshall plantation because it proves the placement of Cajuns between the Marshall family and their African American laborers who continue to make a profit for them. Gil’s argument also demonstrates his denial of upper-class, white superiority over Cajuns because he confronts Candy with her prejudiced assumptions based on class structures.

In her own reading of Gil’s statement, Mary Ellen Doyle asserts, “Gil is moved to turn on Candy and assert Cajun dignity vis-à-vis upper-class whites; in challenging her sense of superiority and condescension to his people, he seems to release his awareness of blacks as his equals, of Cajun injustice to them” (186). Through his personal confrontation with white superiority, Gil can begin to view his African American neighbors as individuals who face an even more intense form of condescension. Cajuns moved onto the land once worked by blacks, brought their machines, and eventually moved the blacks out of the only homes they had ever known. By realizing this tragic past, Gil begins to turn away from his
family’s traditions. Gil becomes Gaines’s vehicle for relating how the Cajun social position makes racial mediation possible.

His role in the novel also addresses the divisions occurring in the Cajun household as the younger generations receive higher educations and are exposed to a broader world view. For Gil, football replaces farming as the career of choice. A famous football hero, Gil relies on his black teammate, Calvin Harrison, to help him win games, making history for LSU and, to a certain extent, making racial mediation possible. Gaines notes the uniqueness of the situation, writing, “It would be the first time this had ever happened, black and white in the same backfield—and in the Deep South, besides” (Gathering 112). Gilbert “Salt” Boutan and Calvin “Pepper” Harrison are only their best as a partnership, which Gil readily acknowledges. Gaines deliberately uses this relationship between Gil and Calvin to demonstrate how racial mediation can be achieved and how it can be beneficial. LSU wins because of racial cooperation between Gil and Calvin; Gil wins because he realizes that he and Calvin are equals on the football field. They are two individuals who work together instead of two races competing to survive within the wealthy white community.

Because of his desire to win games and move beyond the limitations of farm life, Gil opposes his family’s traditional, violent response to Beau’s murder. Gil’s stand against his father represents not only a change in racial politics in the South but also a change in Cajun family structure as Cajuns rush to catch up with the modern world of college, fast food, and life away from the farm. As far as lynching is concerned, Gil admits, “Those days are gone forever, I hope” (Gathering 143). Not only does Gil rely on an African American teammate on the football field, but he also answers to his conscience, which forces him to deny the traditional lynching ritual because of its inhumane and unjust treatment of African Americans. This statement, perhaps more than any other in the novel, demonstrates the Cajun movement away from violence and racial antagonism because of a realization of African American humanity. Instead of appreciating this reading of history, Fix accuses Gil of dismissing family bonds and honor in order to achieve All-American status along with his African American teammate. In Fix’s eyes, the blame for the unraveling of traditional
relationships rests on the education the family has worked to give to Gil.

Whether or not Fix truly realizes it, education is the reason for Gil’s less than enthusiastic response to starting a lynching party. Through his time at LSU, Gil has experienced desegregation to his benefit with his partnership with Calvin Harrison, and he has begun to regard his African American teammate as an individual, a powerful first step towards racial conciliation. Unlike Bonbon, Gil can and does refuse to answer to traditional racial tensions and violence because of his connection with Calvin, perhaps because he depends on Calvin more than Bonbon relied on Jim. By taking this first step, Gil becomes a part of the African American community’s stand against racial injustice and inequality, a stand made possible because of an evolution in race relations in Louisiana between the 1940s and the 1970s.

Although the reason for not retaliating in the old-fashioned way, with a lynching, rests on the world of football statistics, it still motivates the Boutans to reject their old ways and to accept the tragic death of their sibling and son. Football accomplishes what was never possible between Jim and Bonbon in Of Love and Dust: a true mutual dependency, no matter how fragile, between a Cajun and an African American. Fred Hobson discusses both the revolutionary position Gil takes and its superficiality in face of the immense injustice that came before: “The incident of Gil Boutan, I suppose, is more truthful than we might like to think: it announces a South that has indeed changed but not always for the noblest of reasons” (100). Gil’s steps out of racial tension may be in the right direction, but he still has far to go.

Sully, Gil’s friend from college, narrates the section in which Gil confronts his Cajun family. According to Sully, Gil will “shake a black man’s hand as soon as he would a white man’s” (Gathering 131-2), and when Fix argues for retaliation, it is Gil who counters with sympathy for the old men by calling them “Old black men. . . Who have been hurt. . . . Tired old men trying hard to hold up their heads” (137). Unlike Bonbon, Gil openly addresses the notion of possible equality, proving that change has taken place between the 1940s and the 1970s in Louisiana. These moments of racial mediation are marred, however, when Gil argues, “I couldn’t make All-American, Papa, if I was involved in something against
the law” (138), a title that Gil realizes he cannot merit on his own because he needs Calvin to achieve this goal. He even admits to his father, “I can’t make it without Cal, Papa. . . . I depend on him, Papa, every moment I’m on that field” (138).

Despite a hint of racial mediation and an acknowledgment of equality on Gil’s part, his past limits his acceptance of African American humanity as meaningful beyond his own desires and needs. Even though he depends on Cal and sympathizes with the old men, he still reacts out of anger towards Cal before leaving Baton Rouge with Sully, an action Sully reads as racially motivated: “Whether he has anything to do with it or not, [Cal] was guilty because of his color” (115). Sully’s reaction offers some hope that Gil will grow beyond such superficial ideas because Sully believes Gil is “made of better stuff than that” (115). While LSU football is experiencing a climate of change, it is a slow process that must continue to develop for any hope of full equality to exist between the races. As part of this institution, Gil begins to see another way of life, one of mutual respect, as advantageous, which makes this character much more progressive than Bonbon, even if he still has some way to go before he views Cal as an equal regardless of his role in Gil’s rewarding football career.

Meanwhile, the African American males discover their ability to see themselves as individual men who have the right and the courage to stand against white notions of superiority through their rebellion against the law and against the past. When Charlie finally refuses to be controlled by Beau, he breaks through a racial barrier that unleashes his community’s frustrations with past injustice. The chapters narrated by African Americans contain records of past wrongs that went unanswered. Charlie’s action becomes the community’s power to stand. As the African American men recall past sins against them, Gil acknowledges the violence of the past and refuses to return to such notions of retaliation and racial containment. Together, Gil and the African Americans move forward toward possible racial mediation, a conciliation that is possible only if the Cajuns refuse to act in this instance and the African Americans find the courage to stand up for themselves.

Gil prevents his family from retaliating, but Gathering does not end with the Boutan clan’s decision to remain at home. A group of white folks in Bayonne, directed by Luke Will, arrives at the scene
at sunset ready to avenge Beau’s death. Gaines never names these avengers as Cajuns, and his descriptions of them seem to divide them from the Cajun Boutans. While in the Boutan house, Luke says, “Give the word, Fix,” and Fix replies, “What word is that, Luke Will?” (Gathering 140). Instead of including Luke Will in his family’s plan, Fix explains, “That’s my decision to make, Luke Will—and my sons’. Not yours” (141). Thus, the shootout at the end of the novel is not instigated by the Boutans, but by those outside of the Cajun clan, emphasizing Gaines’s theme of Cajun growth in racial matters and shifting racial antagonism toward tension between whites and blacks.

The novel ends with a courtroom scene, complete with bandaged limbs and chaotic testimony. It also ends with a significant reversal of tradition when all the men responsible, including the black men, are freed because the guilty parties were killed in the shooting commotion, erasing the lynching ritual’s power over this particular community and making African Americans and white Louisianians equal in the eyes of the law. Charlie is killed in the gun fight, and his death symbolizes his claim to manhood through his refutation of white oppression. He is not strapped to the electric chair, as Jefferson will be in Gaines’s next novel, A Lesson Before Dying (1993). In fact, Charlie never spends a moment in jail, allowing him to die as he has finally learned how to live—as a proud, black man.

Before closing the novel, Gaines reveals in a parenthetical aside that “LSU beat Ole Miss, twenty-one to thirteen. Both Gil and Cal had over a hundred yards each” (Gathering 212). Perhaps some hope that whites and blacks can live and work together in peace is possible, or maybe the Cajun is already close enough to his African American counterpart to make this bridging of the racial gap a potential reality. In talking about the novel, Gaines himself has said, “the only ones who live in the present are Salt and Pepper. They’re the ones living in the present and they’re the ones who must make this America work. We’ve got to block for each other and do all kinds of things to get to the goal. The football players are a symbol for how we must do this together” (Lowe 25). America’s hope comes from its diversity, but only if white and black realize that to become fully human is to care for and respect all men, to achieve balance. Doyle captures this message when she
writes, “The climatic events equalize and level black and white” (195). By the end of the day, the Cajuns suffer their loss without retaliation, and the union of Salt and Pepper presents some hope of racial mediation, no matter how fragile, to the torn community.

Notes
1. Creoles used the term following the Louisiana Purchase “to differentiate themselves from the foreign-born, and especially the Anglo-Americans” (x). The division between Louisianians and Anglo Americans shifted in the second half of the nineteenth century to a more firm separation of races. Domínguez dates the use of creole, with a lower-case ‘c,’ as a racial identity only after the Civil War (134), and Ladd explains post-Civil War southern fears of being labeled “black” as the reason for distinguishing between Creole and creole (xv). To further complicate the matter, “The growing community of Afro-European miscegenes who were descended from colonial free persons of color and who occupied a special, intermediate place in the racial and social order of antebellum Louisiana and the Gulf port cities began referring to themselves as ‘Creoles of Color’” (Dormon, Creoles x), as a means to distinguish themselves from both the Creoles who identified themselves as white and the slaves of African descent. Ironically, Louisianians who consider themselves Creole today are “generally descendants of French-speaking slaves who were emancipated during or immediately after the Civil War,” and are “almost universally Catholic and largely French-speaking,” adding both another significant meaning to the definition of Louisiana Creole and a refutation of Creoles as white only (Brasseaux 112).
2. Just a page later, he defines Creole of Color as the “group of fair-skinned racially mixed people” who view themselves as a separate ethnicity, and who also present an interesting reading of the complex social position of certain Louisiana races and ethnicities (Gaudet and Wooton 229). Since the Creoles of Color are not the focus of this study, Creole will be used in the text of this paper to refer to the wealthy white landowning class of which Gaines also writes.
3. According to Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre, “The first documented arrival of Acadians occurred in New Orleans in April of 1764” (12). Although this may be the first documented arrival, it may not constitute the first arrival overall. There is some dispute as to the original date of Acadian arrival in colonial Louisiana.
4. The population of Louisiana today demonstrates the intermingling of ethnic communities in Louisiana. In fact, such communities as Creoles of Color and the Houmas Indians continue to represent the interethnic identity found in the state (Brasseaux, French, Cajun, Creole, and Houma). Furthermore, Acadians, once settled in Louisiana, continued their use of French and their practice of Roman Catholicism, but they also developed new foodways, such as gumbo that combines the French roux (a mix of oil and flour) with African okra and other unique seasonings, and new musical traditions as they adopted such instruments as the German diatonic accordion and made them vital to Cajun music.
5. Gaines admits in an interview that Cajun “whiteness” in the minds of the landowners led to better conditions:

Well, you must understand that they were our major competitors. They were the share croppers, the people who were on the next field over from yours. The... Cajuns would have the forward land, which was the better land and the blacks would have the poorer land, because they were renting this same land from another white man. (Lowe 123)

Gaines continues to explain that Cajuns with the better land made more money, and then used the money to purchase machines that soon made black labor appear slow in comparison (123). Yet, as Gaines explains in another interview, the Cajuns would themselves be displaced from the same land about twenty years later (Lowe 187). So, the Cajuns, much like the blacks, were simply pawns in the white landowners’ game.

6. In their introduction to a collection of essays on “white trash,” Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz argue that the term is as much a signifier of race as of class since it names poor whites as “Other.” They argue: “The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes’ sense of cultural and intellectual superiority” (2). This superiority leads to a further theory about American class divisions: “white trash, since it is racialized (i.e. different from ‘black trash’ or ‘Indian trash’) and classed (trash is social waste and detritus), allows us to understand how tightly intertwined racial and class identities actually are in the United States” (4).

7. Grant Wiggins, a schoolteacher who takes on the task of teaching Jefferson how to be a man in A Lesson Before Dying (1993), is a similar character. Like Jim, Grant must also learn of his humanity through the younger African American male.

8. Although Gaines’s Hebert definitely belongs to the wealthy, land-owning class, this particular surname is a popular one within Cajun communities. It can be, and usually is, an Acadian surname in Louisiana, but it can also define one as French or Creole but not of Acadian descent. Furthermore, as Cajun became a signifier of poor whites of French descent in Louisiana, wealthy Acadians distanced themselves from these poorer brethren by assimilating to socially higher Creole ways. Those who remained connected with their Acadian roots still chose to remain divided from Cajuns, leading to the coinage of genteel Acadians to refer to this upper-class community of Acadian descendants in Louisiana. According to Dormon, the term genteel Acadians was coined by folklorist Patricia Rickels in her own study of class division within Acadian culture. In the end, “Those who achieved [economic] success. . . ultimately came to join the dominant planter/bourgeois class,” intentionally separating themselves from the common Cajuns (33). Regardless of ethnic identification, Hebert represents the class divide between wealthy landowners and lower-class Cajun laborers.
Works Cited
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