RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY IN ERNEST GAINES’
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JANE PITTMAN, A LESSON BEFORE DYING, AND A
GATHERING OF OLD MEN

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

English

December 2013

Winston Salem, North Carolina

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my family for their continued support and encouragement. I would especially like to thank my parents and sister whose steadfast belief in my intelligence is extraordinary. I hope this thesis is my first step towards becoming the person you all believe I can be. There is not a word in any language to properly convey the gratitude and love I feel for you all. I would also like to thank Dr. Erica Still. Your patience and guidance was invaluable, and I appreciate you staying the course with me. Thanks goes to the wonderful friends I have made on this journey. You brilliant people have given me many laughs and wonderful conversations. Thanks to Van Le whose multifaceted role as friend, motivator, chef, roommate, complaining confidant, movie partner, and dinner/dessert companion have been a consistent source of calm and reassurance. This whole process would have been exponentially worse without you. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Ernest Gaines whose “Louisiana thing” inspired me to discover my own.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines resistance as a method of identity formation in Ernest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. For this purpose, I situate the author’s focus on rural southern black communities as a way of establishing the importance of communal values, and more specifically, how these values form communal identities. Though I ultimately conclude that Gaines offers collective identity as most viable, my research begins by focusing on the author’s attempts to situate a male identity. Gaines is most known for portrayals of African American masculinity, and this project both examines and problematizes masculine identity formation, especially as it relates to resistance. Mainly, I argue that hetero-normative masculine opposition proves too limiting and cannot sustain the formation of communal identities. Beginning with Gaines’ portrayal of masculine opposition, I aim to demonstrate how African American men unsuccessfully attempt to invest in normative identities as a means of liberation from the socioeconomic constraints of life in the rural south. To expand my analysis of masculinity, I delve into limits of masculine resistance involving characters who adopt more antagonizing forms of hetero-normative masculinity as resistance. The deficiencies of male resistance lead to the final and most important aspect of my argument, which proposes female opposition as providing the space wherein communal identities are formed.
INTRODUCTION

Ernest Gaines has an infatuation, a deep-seated affection, or in layman’s terms, a “thing,” for creating narratives centering on African American peasant culture. In *Conversations with Ernest Gaines (CEG)*, the author qualifies this urge as a “Louisiana thing” (87). This “Louisiana thing” speaks to the author’s particular focus on narratives concerning rural black life in Louisiana. The interviewer, prompting Gaines to explain his adoration of Louisiana, alludes to the author’s limited subject matter, basically questioning why he has not written about California—another locale that holds considerable influence in Gaines’ trajectory as a writer.1 Gaines recognizes this as a valid appraisal of his canon, but candidly responds to the interviewer’s question: “Maybe sometime in the future I will write a good book, or publish a good book, about California. But I doubt that I will be able to do it until I have gotten rid of this Louisiana thing that drives me, yet I hope I never will get rid of that Louisiana thing” (*CEG* 87).

However, though he expounds on his fascination with Louisiana, Gaines does not want to seem as if he is romanticizing African American experiences wherein vigilante violence and legalized prejudice were commonplace. Thus, he recognizes the tacit incongruity of such affection for a place that was often at the forefront of legalizing racism.2 This troubled history makes Gaines scrupulous about reiterating nuances of his “thing” for Louisiana. In *Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines*, the author explains, “I don’t want people to think I’m so desperately in love with Louisiana or the South, as much as I

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1 In *Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines*, the author acknowledges California as the place where his love of reading developed, noting that he “had not read any books […] in Louisiana […] If there were books there in the libraries, [he] would not have been allowed to go there” (33).

2 Charles Vincent’s “‘Of Such Historical Importance…’: The African American Experience in Louisiana” notes that The Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1898 created the “grandfather clause” and in 1902 the state was the first to pass mandatory statutes permitting “Jim Crow street cars” (146).
am with that postage stamp in that area” (121). The “postage stamp” refers to The Quarters, the section of large plantations where slaves were housed. Mary Ellen Doyle’s “Ernest Gaines’ Materials: People, Place, Author” states that, in this space, slaves and their descendents formed into a “culturally united community” (77). Rural communities provide a cultural foundation Gaines’ works deem valuable. Jeffrey J. Folks’ “Communal Responsibility in Ernest J. Gaines’ A Lesson Before Dying” explains the author’s valuation of black rural communities as an attempt to situate “Southern rural tradition” as a source of “cultural coherence” (260). By these standards, Gaines proposes that values of the black peasant class are the basis of African American cultural authority, and the author utilizes his fiction to give voice to these values.

Cultural authority is an important concept in Gaines’ works. As Gaines’ depictions of black rural culture are examined, patterns materialize pinpointing the author’s focus on particular themes regarding the African American peasant class. Chief among those themes is the exploration of “social and technological change in his rural Louisiana setting” (Folks “Communal Responsibility” 33). Gaines’ characters find themselves struggling against modernity, which brings changes that conflict with the communal based identity. These changes primarily concern characters’ readiness to invest in changes brought on by modernity while still beholden to a place—the plantation community—that is rooted in the past.

Continued systemic racism led to the diaspora of African Americans who left the South hoping for better lives in the North, the Midwest, and the West. Gaines’ family took part in this phenomenon, choosing to move to California in 1948, a choice that left Gaines feeling alienated in his new surroundings. This break with the familiar influenced

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3 See CEG for a chronology of the author’s life.
Gaines’ literary portrayals of black southern rural culture, which is contained by time and place despite the author’s migration to the West. Doyle writes that the “tragedy of Gaines’ fiction is less the confinement of life and the aspiration of the quarters than the disappearance of the quarters and the community which it formed” (Doyle “Gaines’ Materials” 81). Likewise, Thadious M. Davis’ “Parishes and Prisons: Ernest Gaines’s Louisiana and Its North Carolina Kin Space” asserts that being uprooted caused Gaines to “[realign] his spatial location with the remembered plantation past, producing a modern writer whose practice of place [is] always […] in a time that was and in a space frozen in time-boundness, an incarceral space” (271). These scholars, along with Folks, highlight parallels between Gaines’ narrative objectives and the communal values espoused in his works. Mainly, Gaines’ staid subject matter mimics communal stasis.

Though the communal values remain intact, social and technological advances complicate the desire to remain inhabitants of plantation communities. This is due to the fact that, after slavery, African Americans in the rural South witnessed social advancements while noticing that progress had not changed their way of life: vigilante violence ran rampant and economic opportunities were limited. This dilemma of place foregrounds issues explored in this project. More specifically, I focus on Gaines’ response to tensions between the significance of plantation communities as offering “authentic” African American cultural identities and the reality that bigotry persistently threatened formation of these communities and identities. Addison Gayle Jr.’s *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* categorizes this balancing act as representative of African American authorship in the twentieth century. Gayle deduces that black novelists “believed that the major battle of the twentieth century would center
around the black man’s campaign to maintain a sense of his historical and cultural peculiarities against those forces, past and present that combined to either assimilate him on American terms or construct definitions to limit his human potential” (138). To combat constraints placed on development of African American cultural autonomy, authors attempt to carve out new space wherein “peculiarities” of black culture can exist coterminous with dominant ideologies attempting to disparage idiosyncrasies of African American culture. This space of reformation necessitates the creation of what Gayle classifies as “a new man” whose task involves performing the “new system of values, morals, and ethics” created out of cultural regression—or, a return to the past (139). Essentially, values of the black peasant class provide the cultural foundation for this new man to emerge.4

Critics offer varied interpretations of what constitutes communal values in Gaines’ fiction. However, most concur that an abounding sense of place, family, and tradition are the main characteristics of Gaines’ collective identity. In Dabney Gray’s “Ernest Gaines’ A Gathering of Old Men: A Southern Perspective,” the author outlines the most salient qualities of “southerness” in Gaines’ works. Gray notes an “abiding emphasis on family heritage, regional history, a reverence for the traditions of specific locales or groups, and an exaggerated sense of place that often perceives an area as both geographic locale and as historical icon” (Gray 31). These characteristics become important as migration separated families and individuals from the place that both necessitated and supported values of the community.

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4 Thadious Davis’ “Southscapes: Race, Region, and Reclamation” delves further into reverse migration back to the South as a space encompassing African Americans’ historical foundation.
Tensions of migration, as previously noted, are the impetus of quite a bit of Gaines’ fiction. Particularly, the author’s emphasis on southern rural culture could be read as a critique of the diaspora. Gaines seems wary of the need to leave one’s community and displace values providing cultural foundations. In his fiction, characters grappling with constraints of life in the plantation community seek the ideological openness of larger cities or different regions. However, this journey does not quell longing for one’s community or the desire to see the community progress. This is implied in Gaines statement that “there must always be those who try to change conditions; there must always be those who try to break out of the trap the world keeps going in” (CEG 29). Gaines’ conjecture is vital, principally in regard to the direction of this thesis. Primarily, I examine Gaines’ portrayals of characters attempting to break cycles stalling both individual and communal advancement. In order to enact such change, especially amidst thriving race hierarchies in the South, characters employ resistance to realign values of the past with opportunities of the present. Gaines depicts this cultural reconfiguration as a layered process, requiring the community to take on resistance as a means of forming a collective identity.

Interestingly, themes of resistance have not garnered Gaines a place within the canon of African American protest writing. Scholars agree that Gaines’ texts stand apart from this genre. Doyle asserts that the 1960s was period during which African writers were pressured to infuse political rhetoric into narratives of black life (Doyle “Gaines’ Materials” 90). However, Gaines did not yield to this trend. Keith Clark’s “Re-

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5 Herman Beavers’ Wrestling Angels into Song: the Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James McPherson explores this idea in his analysis of Gaines’ Catherine Carmier: “Jackson’s life in Louisiana led him to construct the North as a site of both liberation and empowerment […] The North […] is geographically distant from the South but, because of the way racism and discrimination are rendered invisible by the illusion of free access, it is conceptually adjacent” (135).
(W)righting Black Male Subjectivity: The Communal Poetics of Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*” discusses Gaines in context of protest fiction writers. Clark attempts to situate Gaines’ relation to this genre by comparing his use of techniques specific to protest writers like Richard Wright. Wright proves an important counterpoint for examining Ernest Gaines’ relationship to protest fiction. Clark notes that the authors share similar biographical origins as southern African-American writers who deal primarily with “a debilitated male subject—one rendered disabled and disfigured by the scourges of racism and classism” (Clark 195). However, Clark notes a significant difference between Gaines’ and Wright’s attention to male protagonists. By Clark’s definition, Gaines’ “aesthetic endeavor involves the re-centering not merely of the black male voice, but of a black male communal voice which contrasts sharply with the mono-voicedness of protest discourse” (195). Clark’s analysis informs interpretative strategies used in my analysis of Gaines’ texts. I refrain from examining Gaines’ resistance as connected to protest fiction. Rather, resistance becomes the method by which collective values are reinstated as useful, and thus, substantiate communal identity.

My research relies upon Manuel Castells’ “Communal Heavens: Identity and Meaning in the Network Society” to examine the complicated methods by which identity is formed and how Gaines’ texts depict these complexities. Castells’ puts forward three types of identity formation: legitimizing identity, project identity, and resistance identity.6 This project will examine how each formation is acted out and most importantly, explore the effectiveness of each construction. I am interested in examining multiple facets of resistance in Gaines’ novels and utilize Castells to create an arc that illustrates the

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6 Castells’ text lists these constructions in a different order: legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity. The author does not note any particularity regarding this sequence; however, I have chosen to list these concepts following the order they appear in my thesis.
development of Gaines’ portrayals of resistance. The Autobiography of Jane Pittman, A Lesson Before Dying, and A Gathering of Old Men are used to show Gaines’ multi-layered depictions of resistance. In these novels, Gaines’ characterizations of opposition are quite formulaic. The author creates events that force the community to examine the ways in which racist tenets and practices of the Deep South infringe upon and constrain African American humanity. Gaines achieves this by crafting nuanced plots whereby the resistance of one person (generally male), relying upon smaller facets of resistance from other people (women, the community as whole), impacts the community.

Gendered dynamics of resistance are the focus of my analysis. I breakdown Castells’ three types of identity formation and examine each one in relation to variations of Gaines’ gender based representations of resistance. Gaines is most known for his attention to the plight of black men: “You must understand that the blacks who were brought here as slaves were prevented from becoming the men that they could be” (CEG 114). Here, Gaines explains the importance of African American men opposing bigotry and asserting their right to dignity. This statement has sexist undertones—women also made this journey and endured injustices just as men had. However, a feature of Gaines’ gender based resistance involves the conflation of humanity and masculinity. That is, for Gaines, asserting one’s “manhood” is the equivalent of insisting that a person’s humanity be recognized. Though Gaines expresses this idea in terms of gender, if gender is removed from the concept of humanity, the abovementioned quote is applicable to Gaines’ female characters as well—who also employed resistance. This is the crux of my research, which involves problematizing depictions of masculine resistance. It must be

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7 It should also be noted that the project includes some place theory and references to geographical theories of space.
noted that I do not discount overt masculine leanings of Gaines’ texts. Rather, my project seeks to demonstrate that masculine resistance alone does not support the formation of communal identities; collective identities are formed in female led spaces.

Chapter one addresses these issues beginning with Castells’ legitimizing identity formation. I use this as a framework to examine resistance enacted by male characters who invest in legitimizing identities to counter negative constructions of black masculinity. Place theory is also used to illustrate complications between the desire to take on essentialist identities and how the place limits access to such identities. The chapter is divided into three sections, with the first section focusing on The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Particularly, I am concerned with Joe’s pursuit of legitimizing identity and aspiration for this type of identity leads to his downfall. In the next section, I attend to A Lesson Before Dying and its depiction of Jefferson’s incarceration and the ideological transformation he undergoes. I question the usefulness of such a transformation, no matter how significant, in a place where prescriptions of race leave both whites and blacks bound to seemingly irrevocable social conventions. Lastly, the section on A Gathering of Old Men deals with the elderly men’s attempt to defend both land and dignity—a brave pursuit that involves rewriting communal narrative. However, the men do not maintain control over the narrative, and I consider how this proves detrimental to characterizations of their stance.

In chapter two, project identity is introduced and illustrates a progression of ideas fleshed out in the previous chapter. Yet the project identity introduces a more oppositional stance as a method of resistance. Furthermore, this chapter is meant to highlight limitations of masculine resistance; chiefly, it intends to explain why such
opposition cannot sustain the formation of communal identity. There are three subdivisions in this chapter, the first of which pertains to Ned Douglass, a protagonist featured in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*. Ned presents a depiction of masculinity that initially proves useful for reestablishing community based identities. Nevertheless, he comes to represent a somewhat unrealistic depiction of masculine resistance that proves too limiting—an outcome that effects the intransience of his ideals. The second section looks at *A Lesson Before Dying* and the constraints Grant feels while struggling with the community’s stasis. Grant’s inability to separate his personal pride from the humility needed to perform communal obligations, reveals drawbacks of his brand of masculine resistance. *A Gathering of Old Men* takes up the last section. Mathu’s estrangement from the community is the subject of this segment, which delves into dilemmas concerning the elevated status he holds as a member of the community whose ability to counter scripts of race makes him a bit of an outsider. His eventual adoption of the collective identity serves as counterpoint to the other narratives and provides a transition into chapter three.

The final chapter delves into how female characters in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and *A Gathering of Old Men* use Castells’ resistance identity to form communal identities. This idea is grounded in the female sense of community, which promotes communal progress as opposed to personal advancement. This chapter is separated into three parts, with the first segment highlighting shifting dynamics of female resistance as the women encounter less than desirable circumstances. The next section details the measures women take to prevent delinquent community members from obstructing effective resistance. The concluding section grapples with
rootedness and the female task of creating the homeplace as space of both affirmation and opposition. In conclusion, I hope this project contributes to Gainesian scholarship, especially as it relates to the female voices present in the author’s works.
APPROPRIATING ESSENTIALIST IDENTITIES

Gaines’ portrayals of Louisiana situate the author as a modern-day raconteur of Louisiana history, culture, and people. Fittingly, this distinction does not bother Gaines who recalls how, as a youth, stories of himself and “[his] people” were noticeably absent from the shelves in his local library (CEG 75). With this absence never far from his mind, Gaines decided to “write about what [he] did not find in the books, about […] the experiences of [his] people as [he] knew them” (CEG 75-76). These experiences are primarily concerned with race relations and the black peasant class’ attempt to find economic footing in a technologically advanced society evolving without them.

Underlying Gaines’ broader cultural theme is the author’s attention to black masculinity and the undercutting black men encounter as they try to establish themselves as “men” amidst socioeconomic advancements unavailable to the African American peasantry. The idea of remaining in a place that espouses familial and communal history while denying access to basic personal freedoms complicates connections between identity and place. Gaines’ affection for plantation communities is particularly problematic when his attention to gender is noted. Being a “man” is a concept requiring access to powers—political and economic—unavailable to African American men, especially those men residing in the Deep South.

Gaines’ narratives involve characters attempting to resist dominant power systems inhibiting their rights while concurrently upholding values of place. Such a depiction does not encapsulate the inherent contradiction between place and identity formation. William Norton’s *Cultural Geography* asserts that places must be “understood as sites of power struggles, displacements, and contestations” (298). Norton’s statement makes it
clear that no identity, especially an identity based on ideals of a particular place, can be formed without encountering place as a site of conflict. In Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, A Lesson Before Dying*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*, this conflict involves African American males developing affirmative identities in a place that does not support the formation of such identities.

Emphasis on place as integral to identity creates characters who invest in a legitimizing identity. Outlined by Manuel Castells, this type of identity formation is one of three forms of identity construction. Castells identifies legitimizing identity as “introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination” (8). Legitimizing identities create binaries differentiating between those possessing legitimated identities and those who do not, which in turn, allows those possessing legitimized identities to claim superiority over individuals who cannot stake a claim to this type of identity. In the socioeconomic contexts of Gaines’ works, wealthy white males possessed legitimated identities and employed this identity to maintain social and economic authority. In *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*, Steve Estes asserts that white men used “masculinist rhetoric to defend the privileges that whiteness and manhood had afforded them in the economic [and] political […] spheres” (7). Such rhetoric is the cornerstone of creating and maintaining legitimimized identities. Manhood is constructed in terms of race, and if one does not possess whiteness, which would grant access to such power, then one cannot rightfully lay claim to the advantages of said identity. As a rejoinder to binaries between legitimated and illegitimate identities, African American men commission legitimimized identities as a way of procuring access to social and economic advantages.
When legitimizing identities are employed by Gaines’ African American male protagonists, I suggest that this form of identity construction proves unreliable. Socioeconomic systems and racism were designed to make “manhood”—a concept consisting of social and economic privileges systematically and purposefully denied to African American men—unattainable for black males. Legitimized identities are not transformative—primarily because race stipulates that black men, regardless of how successfully they appropriate masculine ideals, cannot be legitimized. The legitimized identity of southern, white, and wealthy masculinity necessitates that black men remain othered, disallowing any full appropriation of a legitimate identity.

I will demonstrate how the conflict between place and legitimizing identity formation fails to substantiate masculine identities. Mainly, when African American male characters enact masculine identities, they are granted provisional access to its advantages. Sooner or later, however, the economic configuration of Reconstruction, spatial and ideological formation of prison, and vestiges of plantation culture are reiterated and weaken social and economic advantages generated by legitimated identities. Gaines’ black male characters are only able to approximate some semblance of empowerment. Even when African American men enact masculine ideologies of legitimized identity, economic and social structures are reasserted as a reminder of their limited authority.

Reconstructing Identity during Reconstruction

For the purposes of my argument, I will begin with Reconstruction and how economics and politics merged to maintain the power of wealthy, white men—inhibiting African American attempts at socioeconomic progress. The fraught economic landscape
of Reconstruction is attributed by many scholars as the foundation of vigilante violence and Jim Crow Laws. Jack M. Bloom’s *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* concludes that “in the postbellum South […], the agrarian class, while subordinate to Northern capitalism, retained its dominance and set the political tone for the region” (2). Maintaining dominance required that the upper-classes hold on to economic and political advantages, which mostly involved manipulating lower-class whites against African Americans. Edna Bonacich’s “Abolition, the Extension of Slavery, and the Position of Free Blacks: A Study of Split Labor Markets in the United States, 1830-1863” explains how ethnic antagonism results from a split market occurring because of ethnic labor. Bonacich describes this phenomenon as taking place when a labor market contains “at least two groups of workers whose price of labor differs for the same work or would differ if they did the same work” (603). In the South where slave labor dominated, antagonism from working-class whites had been longstanding. As a matter of fact, the lower-class whites’ aggression toward African Americans became a marker of class. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* by C. Vann Woodward notes that upper-class whites, who more than likely had regular interactions with blacks, were characterized more by their paternalism than antagonism (49-50). This relationship proved somewhat beneficial to African Americans, especially given their need for protection from working-class animosity.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, these issues of Southern economics play out as Jane and other freed slaves rebuild lives during Reconstruction. Told through the viewpoint of Jane Pittman, the text details the political changes occurring in Louisiana during Reconstruction. Most of Jane’s commentary regarding this period
focuses on economic and political efforts made on behalf of newly freed slaves. She explains that politicians came to the “big house to hold meetings”; mainly, politicians wanted Jane and her contemporaries to “vote Republican” (Autobiography 68). Engaging in politics was certainly not a new trend for African Americans but openly engaging political issues was a new aspect black life in the South. Through the political process, former slaves were made active participants in decisions that would impact their futures.

Yet Jane’s depiction provides telling commentary on the frivolity of Reconstruction politics. It is clear that, as a former slave, she has an important stake in the political conversations taking place. However, when Jane recalls specific dogmas of the political parties, she does not simply state their beliefs; she qualifies statements with the phrase “they said” or “they wanted”: “They wanted us to take interest in what was going on. They wanted us to vote—and vote Republican. The Democratic Party was for slavery, they said, and believe it or not, they said, there was niggers in the Democrat Party, too. You could always spot him, they said, because he had a white mouth and a tail” (emphasis added; Autobiography 68). Besides making it apparent that these ideas do not represent her or her peers, Jane also reveals that politics mostly concerned party affiliation, not people. “They” serves as an implication of the division between the masses and those possessing political influence.

Division is an ironic, though unavoidable, aspect of the political climate during Reconstruction. This period of rebuilding was intended to restructure the South economically and—by extension—politically, but the southern aristocracy did not plan to relinquish control. In order to maintain influence, the Democratic Party, or southern planter class, sought to leverage the black vote, aspiring to control the Democratic Party
at the federal level (Bloom 29). While southern aristocrats sought to capitalize on black vote, northern radicals had a similar agenda in place for the purposes of disempowering the planter class. Bloom details that northerners “enfranchised blacks and disenfranchised some 100,000 whites” (29). Although Jane’s political leanings remain obscure, history shows that the Republican Party effectively controlled the black vote and the South.

The Republican Party proved to be the party of the people, adopting a platform catering to the working-class. Yet Democrats, still trying to reestablish dominance, began to reform their party along lines of race and region (Bloom 31). This allowed Democrats to bolster appeal to lower-class whites. Though still very much the party of the wealthy planter-class, Democrats portrayed the Republican Party as “the party of blacks” (Bloom 31). Socioeconomic advancement of the South’s lower-class is derailed by race rhetoric and begins the rise of violence against African Americans.

Vigilante violence was employed as a way to control both blacks and whites. Ironically, the southern aristocracy, once preaching principles of noblesse oblige, permitted the use of force against those they formerly sought to protect. Vigilante groups were known throughout the South as intimidators of both blacks and whites. Jane summarizes their activity as “beating and killing. Would kill any black man who tried to stand up and would kill any white man who tried to help him” (Autobiography 70). Additionally, Jane explains that black men seeking economic independence were those who became farmers after the Civil War. A black farmer could be assaulted or murdered for many reasons: “The secret groups would come out there and beat them just because their crops was cleaner than the white man’s crop. Another time they would beat a man because he had some grass in his crops” (Autobiography 70). As Jane notes, reasoning
behind such violence was varied and arbitrary. The blacks upon whom violence was perpetuated found themselves caught in the political clash between Republican and Democratic visions for the New South.

Intimidation was used by whites as a means of asserting political and economic hierarchies. Bloom concludes that “all classes” of whites in the South were involved and used violence for different purposes (31). The primary purpose of violence was gaining control of black labor. Violence became the method white laborers used to “drive blacks out so as to eliminate them as competitors”; upper-classes, relying on cheap, black labor, used intimidation to stop African Americans from escaping violence (Bloom 31). Eventually, violence and intimidation entered politics and the Republican Party abandoned its position in the South. Woodward describes the Republican Party’s departure stating that they “began to lose interest in the freedmen’s cause and federal protection was withdrawn” (51). Bloom concurs, noting that the government removed troops and allowed the South to “go its own way,” which ended Republican influence in the region (33). Consequently, minute advancements on behalf of both black and white working-classes were undone, with black progress stagnated and brutality becoming commonplace.

Under the constraints of wealthy white planters and white laborers’ cruelty, freedmen tried to assert themselves as men. However, with the southern aristocracy in control, black men experienced a steady decline in economic and civil rights. These rights are the source of their struggles to be seen as men. “A man,” as defined by Gaines, “can speak up, he can do things to protect himself, his home, and his family” (author’s emphasis; CEG 114). Namely, black men’s voices were muted by the creation of a
hierarchy that can only exist if they remain at its bottom. David R. Goldfield’s “Race Relations and Southern Culture” asserts, “Racial etiquette bound black men to a role that negated their manhood, that questioned if not destroyed their traditional roles as protectors and breadwinners in a society where such images were important” (8). “Traditional” masculinity is not an option for African American men, and Gaines understands black manhood as a constant site of upheaval.

Black men remained economically beholden to planters by way of sharecropping and paternalism. Joe Pittman, Jane’s common-law husband, illustrates post-slavery economics and its potential pitfalls. Joe is presented as an anomaly; in search of autonomy, he seeks a location where he will be treated more equally. Before Joe and Jane can leave their home, he must tell his former employer that he wants to quit his job. Joe, who breaks horses for a living, cannot speak honestly to his employer and simply say that he was leaving for more money and better treatment. Instead, Joe has to pretend he is leaving to become a sharecropper: “He wouldn’t dare tell the old colonel he wanted to go break horses for more money, he told him sharecropping” (Autobiography 84). This sort of maneuvering shows the disparity between the wealthy and the formerly enslaved. Joe has to conceal his aspiration for financial independence—a desire positioning him within specifications of hetero-normative masculinity—out of fear that he may be thought of as unappreciative.

When acted out by a former slave, behavior normally designating a man as a “man” is viewed as a slight. Though Joe offers sharecropping as an excuse for his departure, Colonel Dye replies, “What’s the matter, I ain’t been treating you right?” (Autobiography 84). The colonel’s statement reiterates race and class hierarchy,
reinforcing his role as caretaker and protector. The colonel represents the leadership in place after northern Republicans left the South. His response to Joe reflects the values of the southern landed gentry. Woodward contends that “Southern conservatives believed that every properly regulated society had superiors and subordinates, that each class should acknowledge its responsibilities and obligations” (48). In this context, the idea of a landowner having a business relationship with subordinates, particularly when those subordinates were previously considered property, would counter class ideology. Paternalism allows wealthy agrarians to maintain authority, and instead of viewing their financial dealings with black laborers as business, planters treated blacks as if employment were an act of kindness. Noblesse oblige masks the commercial aspect of the colonel and Joe’s relationship, allowing the colonel to render Joe as a child rebelling against a parent. The colonel tells Joe how much he is needed to “mind [his] stock,” because his “children [are] too lazy to do a thing” (*Autobiography* 84). Joe is given the opportunity to become a kind of heir, but his need for autonomy supersedes any offer the colonel can make. When paternalism fails to persuade Joe, the colonel’s sense of obligation fades. Joe is no longer a child rebelling against a father figure; the colonel decides to deal with Joe solely on terms of business.

The colonel’s shift from paternalism to business does not prove advantageous to Joe. While such condescension undermines Joe, as Bloom points, paternalism sometimes proved beneficial to African Americans. Treatment towards blacks could range from benign to brutal, but depending on the circumstances, African Americans could turn to the upper-class for protection (Bloom 4). In Joe’s case, the colonel’s noblesse oblige leads to potential gain. He is not only offered more money but he is also offered a piece
of the colonel’s land to sharecrop—an option the colonel had previously eschewed (*Autobiography* 84). Furthermore, it is noted that the colonel paid one hundred fifty dollars to protect Joe from the Klan after he had become involved in politics (*Autobiography* 84). Yet Joe’s need for self-governance and equal treatment nullify any possibility of remaining in the colonel’s care, no matter how beneficial the relationship may prove. Nevertheless, rejecting the colonel’s paternalism also means rejecting the leniency his noblesse oblige produced. Jane remembers that Joe knew “he didn’t owe Colonel Dye any money, but how could he prove it? The Freedom [Bureau] once, but they wasn’t there no more” (*Autobiography* 85). Both Jane and Joe understand that legal protection is not extended to African Americans, particularly in dealings with wealthy white men. There are also no governing bodies in the South to make certain blacks were treated fairly. Joe knows that he must accept Colonel Dye’s terms or remain in a situation where he is treated condescendingly, which is not an option. Jane explains that Joe travelled—“on foot”—one hundred miles to ask his new employer for a loan to pay his debt (*Autobiography* 85). After returning and paying his debt, Colonel Dye tells Joe that he owes thirty dollars interest (*Autobiography* 85). Again, Colonel Dye asserts his positions as Joe’s superior, mostly out of spite at Joe’s ability to repay the debt. Valerie Babb’s *Ernest Gaines* states that “Jane makes it evident that extricating oneself from economic bondage was almost as difficult as extricating oneself from physical bondage” (86). Economic bondage, similar to slavery, provided the constraints necessary to keep African American’s indebted to landowners like Colonel Dye. If Joe leaves without paying his “debt,” he would be subject to a legal system that does not protect him from Colonel Dye’s fabricated offenses.

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However, Joe’s desire for independence provides the impetus needed for him and Jane to leave the colonel’s plantation. Jane and Joe use all of their savings and sell most of their belongings to pay the colonel’s “interest,” but she recalls the pride they felt having found the wherewithal to leave undesirable circumstances (*Autobiography* 86). Jane, unlike Joe, is not seeking autonomy, though she understands his longing. In this instance, autonomy is characterized as a masculine desire that cannot be quantified by material value. When the couple settles into their new home, Jane encourages Joe to acquire land for farming but he is uninterested. Joe understands that, as farmer, “‘He’s go’n have to take orders from some white man,’” yet, when breaking horses, he does not “‘take orders from a soul on earth’” (*Autobiography* 93). Joe is drawn to both the freedom and control he feels while breaking horses. In Daniel Thomières’ “Man’s Way and Woman’s Way in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,” the author correlates Joe’s past as a slave and his devotion to breaking horses. Joe’s occupation serves as a recapitulation of the master/slave dichotomy: “When [Joe] breaks a horse, […] he symbolically plays the role of slave owner or of the overseer” (Thomières 227). Though symbolic, these roles manifest in a tangible way that affects Joe’s ability to understand the actuality of his situation. Specifically, when Joe receives the title “Chief Breaker” and the nickname “Chief Pittman” the master/slave dynamic becomes a reality, particularly in Joe’s own mind (*Autobiography* 93). He reasons that the moniker “chief” is a product of his superior skill and also refers to the fact that his expertise is not honed or directed by anyone else. Joe is finally in charge of his own person, a feat that would not have happened had he remained in Colonel Dye’s care.
Joe’s autonomous state, although fulfilling, is mostly superficial. He remains in a socioeconomic arrangement wherein he has limited power. The actual work of breaking horses frees Joe from being infantilized and from potential threats he could presumably encounter as a sharecropper, but to view this independence as if separate from the extant economic circumstances is problematic. Such a view does not account for the tangible value placed on Joe’s work. He views breaking horses as an existential profession, but Joe’s skill has a monetary value, benefitting himself and, mostly, his employer. For example, Joe responds to Jane’s request that he become a farmer by noting that “He was too valuable to just pack up and quit” (Autobiography 93). Joe hints at a slight understanding of the economic value placed on his work, but he does not separate financial worth from his personal value. That is, Joe “has the impression that at long last he is able to assert his own personal value […] things no longer depend on the color of his skin” (Thomières 224). The ranch resembles a sort of Eden where Joe can be his own man and where blacks and whites seemingly interact without prescriptions of race. Jane recalls that “Everybody was happy, the white and the black” (Autobiography 94). However, racial harmony does not conceal classed dealings between Clyde, the ranch owner, and Joe. It is noted that Clyde held a rodeo and people came “from all over” to “[b]et on Joe”; the ranch owner “made as much on his rodeo as he made selling the horses” (Autobiography 92). Not only does Clyde capitalize on Joe’s skill but in the process, Joe becomes a figurative example of the horses he so prides himself on breaking. Similar to these animals, Joe’s skill is harnessed and employed to make profit for someone else. Joe’s value, like that of the horses, is based on his ability to generate profit for his employer.
Essentially, Joe’s perception of his personal worth hinges upon his financial worth to Clyde. He is only able to remain autonomous due to his horse breaking ability, yet this skill, not unlike sharecropping, still places him under authority of someone else’s wealth. Thomières explains that Clyde “needs [Joe] because of his financial value as an employee and performer at rodeos” (224). Because Clyde needs Joe for financial gain, the latter is spared a life of sharecropping. This alliance, however, is not the type between Joe and Colonel Dye. Instead of land, Joe is given independence. He does not take orders from a white man, but a white man provides materials necessary for Joe’s autonomy. This does not become a problem until Jane starts having dreams presaging Joe’s death. Such knowledge leads Jane to pose farming as an option but, as noted, Joe knows that farming would not provide independence. Charles S. Aiken’s “Blacks in the Plantation South: Unique Homelands” observes that between 1865 and 1885 most African Americans residing in the South were employed as farmers with few possessing ownership of the lands they farmed (62-63). Ownership would presumably provide the motivation needed for Joe to stop breaking horses, but he knows that this is not possible. Breaking horses is the most favorable option available. Unfortunately, maintaining autonomy, which is priceless to Joe, requires that he remain financially valuable to Clyde. This requirement eventually leads Joe to try to catch a stallion he had been determined to break, leading to his death. Because ownership, whether of himself or property, remained controlled by those possessing economic privileges limited to African American men, Joe is willing to die pursing the one aspect of life where he feels he can truly claim to be “chief.”
Countering Identities of Conviction

Gaining some semblance of a legitimized masculine identity not only involves economic struggle, but also requires that one grapple with spatial limitations. Whether these limitations take shape in the social, economic, or political constraints of the South, or in the literal and figurative confinement of jail, black men struggle to obtain legitimated identity against all odds. In its portrayal of Jefferson, *A Lesson Before Dying* continues this thread. Jefferson is a young man sentenced to death for supposedly robbing a store and killing its white patron. Death foregrounds Jefferson’s need to obtain some semblance of legitimated manhood. Before his execution, Miss Emma, his godmother, arranges for the plantation school teacher to instruct Jefferson on how to be a man. As a prisoner, Jefferson is stripped of economic and political freedoms so valuable in the development of legitimized masculinity—and necessary to be deemed a possessor of this sort of manhood. Instead, Jefferson’s quest for legitimacy involves realigning spatial configurations of imprisonment as a way of redefining social limitations of prison. Amidst the spatial construction of confinement Jefferson must realize his personal value. The jail cell is constructed in a way that develops “prisoner” as the most valid marker of identity. Yet Jefferson adopts a legitimated identity grounded in his refusal to be defined by imprisonment and insists that his humanity be recognized. However, the spatial make-up of prison, along with southern racial precepts, undoes the work of legitimized masculine identity.

Jefferson’s low self-worth is not helped by his trial and conviction. His attorney, as opposed to proving Jefferson innocent, crafts an argument relying upon the ability to dehumanize Jefferson to the point that a death sentence seems unjustifiable. The lawyer
begins by calling attention to Jefferson’s age. At twenty-one, according to the attorney, “‘civilized’” young men would have reached manhood, and therefore would have had enough intelligence to understand differences between morality and immorality (*Lesson 7*). Juxtaposing civilized behavior with Jefferson’s actions implicitly brands Jefferson as deviant and incapable of knowing how to act as a “man” is expected. This comparison leads to the characterization of Jefferson as “‘boy and a fool’” not having the “‘sense to run’” when he witnessed the robbery (*Lesson 7*). Jefferson undergoes the same sort of infantilizing that made Joe leave Colonel Dye’s farm. Yet, in this context, infantilism is utilized to save Jefferson’s life. Because his life is at stake, however, simply recasting Jefferson as a hybrid man-child is not enough to negate his presumed guilt. Thus, his attorney takes the argument further.

Phrenology, a pseudoscience used to substantiate race hierarchies, is used to dehumanize Jefferson, and begins the transition toward the defense’s last effort to completely strip Jefferson of humanity. Jefferson transitions from “‘boy and fool’” into a configuration of substandard body parts: “‘Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence?’” (emphasis added; *Lesson 7*). Jefferson’s body is parsed to invalidate any notion that he may be human. He is a limited to a skull, face, and eyes—all of which, in lawyer’s opinion, hold no human value. Arthur Saint-Aubin’s “A Grammar of Black Masculinity: A Body of Science” explains how pseudoscience, such as phrenology, employed the body as a marker of intelligence distinguishing humans and animals: “Since intellectual capacity and the faculty of reason were postulated as the distinguishing characteristic separating man from the lower animals, skull size became
the measure to determine the hierarchy among the races of man as well as the measure to separate man from ape” (3). In this case, physical features become the medium his attorneys use to animalize Jefferson. The final and most significant insult to Jefferson’s humanity occurs when he is called a hog with the implication being that sentencing Jefferson to death is the equivalent of convicting and killing a “hog” (Lesson 8). Humans, as Joe’s circumstance reveals, have the capacity for self-governance, and Jefferson’s life is only worth sparing when he is thought to be less than human. However, the defense’s argument does not convince the jurors (“twelve white men,” Lesson 8) and Jefferson’s life is not spared.

Unfortunately, Jefferson internalizes the attorney’s remarks, so a part of his learning to be a man involves reasserting his humanity. This task proves difficult, particularly in the confined space of prison. Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch’s “How Territory Shapes Social Life” understand spaces as having “constitutive/constraining/meditative roles” (9). While in prison, these roles of space affect Jefferson’s ability to disregard the attorney’s comments. Prison, its confinement and lack of material comforts, make Jefferson feel even further away from humanity:

The cell was roughly six by ten, with a metal bunk covered by a thin mattress and a woolen army blanket; a toilet without seat or toilet paper; a washbowl, brownish from residue and grime; a small metal shelf upon which was a pan, a tin cup, and a tablespoon. A single light bulb hung over the center of the cell, and at the end opposite the door was a barred window, which looked out onto a sycamore tree behind the courthouse. [Grant] could see the sunlight on the upper leaves. But the
window was too high to catch sight of any other buildings on the ground (Lesson 71).

In the constitutive/constraining/meditative space Jefferson is not only imprisoned, but he also takes on the identity of prisoner. For instance, after Grant’s description of the jail cell, he notes that Jefferson refuses to respond to questions from his godmother. She is concerned for his well-being, and refuses to let Jefferson be defined by imprisonment. Though Miss Emma reminds Jefferson that incarceration does not negate his humanity, he “didn’t answer and kept his eyes on the ceiling” (Lesson 71). Grasping some sense of humanity is not Jefferson’s concern. He is preoccupied with his impending death, ignoring questions about his welfare, and choosing instead to inquire about who would pull the switch on the electric chair (Lesson 74). Chante B. Martin’s “‘How a (Black) Man Should Live’: Southern ‘Places’ of Memory, Instruction, and Transformation in Ernest Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying” underscores how spaces such as the jail “operate as symbolic ‘classrooms’ where African American males are made aware of the limitations proscribed to their specific gendered racial identities and are conditioned to accept such restrictions” (244). Teaching Jefferson to be a man involves developing an identity separate from incarceration and confinements of life in the South that have contributed to his dehumanization.

When Jefferson is treated with kindness, he realizes his value as a person. His journal highlights this transition as Jefferson apologizes for becoming emotional after Grant tells him that he will have to miss one of their visits: “i cry cause you been so good to me […] an nobody aint never been good to me an make me think im somebody” (Lesson 232). Thadious Davis’ “Parishes and Prisons: Ernest Gaines’s Louisiana and its
North Carolina Kin Space” explains that Gaines’ characters understand that “change never comes to the spatial world and never materialized within the social space […] change is only a glimmer in the behavior of the people” (306). Likewise, Jefferson knows that he will live the remainder of his life incarcerated, a painful reality that he does not let hinder his personal development. As Jefferson comes to value himself, he is no longer defined by incarceration. This allows him to “walk straight” (*Lesson* 254) as he prepares to be executed.

Jefferson becomes symbolic of such a change, but as Davis recognizes, shifts in people’s behavior do not alter the race hierarchy that remains. In Katherine Daley and Carolyn M. Jones’ “Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*: Freedom in Confined Spaces,” the authors point out that “Everyone in the novel is bound in Southern hierarchy” (emphasis added; 89). This hierarchy maintains divisions, be that of class or race, impacting both African Americans and whites, and regardless of whether Jefferson’s self-esteem transforms, he is still subjected to a race based existence.

As death approaches, the restricted space is less limiting due to Jefferson’s realization that he is not defined by incarceration; however, Jefferson remains a prisoner and broaching the boundaries of his circumstance proves difficult. For example, Jefferson, familiar with one of the younger deputy’s family, inquires about the young man’s wife and son. Jefferson adopts a role similar to that of Miss Emma. That is, he shows that he is capable of recognizing his own humanity and that of others, no matter the situation. Such behavior counters the attorney’s illustration of Jefferson as a mindless, animalistic “thing” possessing no capacity for reason or—more importantly—kindness. The deputy answers Jefferson’s questions but “tried not to meet Jefferson’s eyes when
Jefferson looked up at him” (245). The deputy’s reaction is not an expression of displeasure; rather, he hopes to avoid Jefferson’s gaze as a means of avoiding his humanity. In Herman Beavers’ *Wrestling Angels into Song: the Fictions of Ernest J. Gaines and James McPherson*, the author identifies the attorney’s depictions of Jefferson as an attempt to “implement a new social gaze through which to ascertain Jefferson’s story” (175). Yet Jefferson’s exchange with the deputy counters this “social gaze” and the deputy cannot reconcile that the “Jefferson” he had been instructed to “see” bears no resemblance to the person inquiring about the well-being of his family. Avoiding Jefferson’s gaze allows Claude to ignore the humanity of a person society has deemed inhumane.

Jefferson’s interaction with Claude could stand as a metaphor for his entire narrative. He finds himself bound by a situation he did not create and cannot entirely resist, but in spite of the death sentence, Jefferson discovers manhood/personhood. Furthermore, when Jefferson expresses himself as humane, he is ignored. Jefferson’s autonomy is important but it does not negate the fact that he is an innocent young man put to death for a crime he did not commit. Autonomy does not invalidate the systemic racism precipitating his death in the first place.

Throughout the text, Gaines’ detailed portrayal of race relations reveals small ways in which the southern precepts of race, along with the space of the prison, reiterate hierarchy. For instance, Grant laments that Jefferson is sentenced by twelve white men “without consulting one black person” (*Lesson* 188). As noted in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, justice was not guaranteed for African Americans, especially in matters involving whites. Martin further explains complications regulating African
American citizenship: “For African Americans, claiming the basic rights of citizenship, historically not only has been shaped by the caveat written into America’s founding documents regarding their marginal social positioning but also was once complicated by the laws of Jim Crow” (245). Jim Crow Laws proposed that whites and blacks had separate but equal standing but Jefferson’s case shows that, where race is concerned, equality is secondary. Tenets of segregation are also revealed in more subtle ways, such as the courthouse bathrooms. Whites and blacks had separate restrooms, with the areas for African Americans located in the basement which could only be entered from the parking lot (Lesson 69). These diminutive specifics of black life served as a continuous reminder that by virtue of one’s skin color (s)he was not worthy of respect and humanity.

Humanity was less important than making certain African Americans understood their place in society. Jefferson’s tenure in prison exemplifies this reality; he lives locked in a cell and when not confined to this space he is chained. Grant recalls meeting Jefferson in the prison’s dayroom and “the first thing you heard were the chains around [Jefferson’s] ankles” as he approached (Lesson 188). He is allowed to leave his cell and receive visitors in the dayroom, but chains contain Jefferson’s movement in the open space, reinstating confinement. In this instance, Jefferson’s confined state precedes his person. This reminder of physical captivity also reinforces the notion that literal self-governance or self-control is not available to him while incarcerated.

Rebels or Relics?

In A Gathering of Old Men, enacting legitimized identity involves standing up to vigilante violence enacted by Cajuns. A group of elderly African American men come together in defense of Mathu, who is accused of murdering Beau Bouton, a Cajun farmer.
This novel could be read as a response to Jefferson’s narrative. Having lived through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement, these men had encountered and been victims of scenarios similar to that of Jefferson. They understand that laws are conditional. Because of this reality, the men expect the Cajuns to violently avenge the death of one of their own, and similarly, they are determined to die defending Mathu.

Standing against the Cajuns is meant to counter the men’s well-known docility and serves as an enactment of legitimated identity. As noted, African American men can implement legitimated masculine identities, but this gains temporary access to power. This idea is important in an analysis of *A Gathering of Old Men*. Particularly, the socioeconomics of plantation life have stripped black peasant class of their livelihood, and their adoption of hetero-normative masculinity serves as a way of opposing the extant economic system. Land stewardship is the foundation of this tension. The men are defending the land that they and their ancestors tended until it was given to Cajun farmers. The men are not so much fighting for the land’s return, as much as they are angry at the continued disrespect and violence they have endured in a place that belongs as much to them as to wealthy whites and Cajuns. To this effect, they plan to use the same vigilante tactics employed by both poor and wealthy whites to maintain power.

For the elderly men, this entails using violence to reassert their claim to the place and also involves revising communal narratives. Finding the courage to stand against Cajuns involves the creation of a new communal narrative that encompasses their newfound courage while acknowledging historical connections to the land. Yet by the novel’s conclusion the men become comedic emblems of black southern culture, negating their implementation of legitimizing identity. As the men’s brave stance garners public

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9 See *Gathering* 38, 45, 93-105.
attention, they lose control of the collective narrative, and this loss of control reinstitutes race stereotypes.

Relations between Cajuns and African Americans were historically fraught. To explain, these two groups represent Bonacich’s definition of a split labor market: black labor was cheaper and this produced Cajun antagonism toward African Americans. Mary Ellen Doyle’s “Ernest Gaines’ Materials: Place, People, Author” provides a brief historical background of relations between French landowners, Cajuns, and African Americans. 

Early French settlers held large plantations employing slave labor, while Cajuns were “fishers and independent farmers” (Doyle “Materials” 78). With the end of slavery, farming became the most prominent profession among former slaves. The influx of new competitors deepened Cajun hostility toward African Americans. But as wealthy French and English families lacked “heirs or money,” plantations were divided between Cajuns and African Americans (Doyle “Materials” 79). Gaines remembers how difficult it was for black farmers competing with Cajuns. The author notes that land was not divided equally; Cajuns received the more fertile land and made enough money to mechanize farming (CEG 123). Financial resources allowed Cajuns to significantly exceed the production of African American sharecroppers.

For African Americans, economic animosity towards Cajuns was compounded by racial animosity. The novel’s multi-vocal narration uses varied perspectives to detail blurred boundaries of race and economics. Cherry, one of the many African American men, laments the state of land-ownership: “Beau and his family had been leasing the land

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10 Other resources on the history of Cajun culture and migration include Laurence E. Estaville’s “Nouvelle Acadie: The Cajun Homeland.”
11 Aiken offers interesting statistics and information about African American farmers after slavery until 1990, 61-64.
the past twenty-five, thirty years. The very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people’s people had worked since the time of slavery” (Gathering 43). This statement reveals the depth of connection African Americans feel towards the land. In rural communities, land offered sustenance and such reliance shapes the ways by which people relate to place. Most of the men at Mathu’s home are present because the continuous loss of place unsettles them to the point that they are determined to reclaim the land. One of the men alleging to have killed Beau Bouton offers that the “tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn’t [murder Beau Bouton] one day that tractor was g’on come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that we ever was” (Gathering 92). The graveyard is the only marker of the community’s past.

In Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooten’s Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines, Gaines states the importance of land as offering an ancestral connection or, as Gaines refers, to it “getting back to dirt again” (131). The return to the earth not only references death but also alludes to a return to communal provenance and rituals. “The dirt is there, and they’re all mixed up there,” Gaines explains, “just as they used to mix up the jambalaya and the gumbo when they were alive” (Gaudet and Wooten 131). Cajun commoditization of the land interrupts this symbolic home-going, and risks permanently displacing communal legacy. In Yi-Fu Tuan’s Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, discussions of homeland emphasize that “place is permanent and hence reassuring to man” (154). For the elderly black men, permanence of place is a fleeting idea and the last vestige of their ancestors requires protection.
The community remembers that, when younger, these men avoided confrontation with Cajuns. It is noted that some of the men “crawl[ed] under the bed” when Fix and his group went on violent sprees (Lesson 28). Interestingly, imagery of the men crawling and their subsequent refusal to continue this behavior parallels the reason Beau Bouton was murdered. The novel concludes with Charlie, Mathu’s godson, confessing to the murder. Charlie expresses how he had lost patience with the younger white man’s disrespect. Charlie states that Beau “cussed” and “beat” him for no reason; at fifty years old Charlie decided that a man should not have to suffer through such treatment (emphasis added; Lesson 191). Deciding to counter Cajun violence reveals that the men have finally adopted idealized versions of masculine authority. Manhood involves—similar to Joe’s and Jefferson’s plights—breaking the cycle of perpetual boyhood.

Yet the men’s display of newly discovered normative masculinity verges on what Beavers refers to as a “carnivalesque impulse” (171). After a lifetime of hiding from Fix, the men wait until old age to finally stand up. The serious elements of the text entails the many losses suffered due to prejudice and violence but absurdity is not omitted. Miss Merle, a mother-figure to the plantation’s heiress, highlights the farcical aspect of the old men’s intended exploit. In her anger at the old men’s last attempt at courage, Miss Merle cannot disregard the potential risk and ridiculousness. With repetition of the phrase “‘Just look at this’” Miss Merle calls attention to the severity of their situation (Gathering 125). Just looking at the old men, one does not see heroism or courage—simply put, they are old men waiting for Fix as if going to war.¹² The elderly men are not intended to completely appropriate standardized versions of masculinity. They are supposed to be anti-heroes whose courage, at this point in their lives, is not called for. After decades of

¹² See Gathering, 49.
avoiding Fix’s brutality, these men have made it to old age and could presumably live out the remainder of their lives without conflict. Yet the idea that these old men should not be at Mathu’s side; or, rather, that they do not have to be at Mathu’s side, makes their actions heroic.

Detailing the state of affairs requires acknowledgment of both absurdity and courage. Uncle Billy, one of the supposed assailants, exemplifies the humorous and valiant aspects of the old men’s conquest. In an effort to make Uncle Billy confess his innocence, the sheriff asks him to demonstrate the proper way to aim a gun, but the old man cannot complete the task: “For a moment he didn’t even know which eye to shut. When he finally figured that out, the gun was shaking so much you would have thought it was one of those divining rods that had just discovered water” (Gathering 81).

Obviously, Uncle Billy did not shoot Beau Bouton. Still, he insists that he “did it” (Gathering 82). He refuses to allow laughable marksmanship to lessen the power of finally standing up to terrorism.

The black men have historically been laughingstocks, and humor comes to symbolize the men’s lack of control over the space, which makes their resistance seem somewhat superficial. After the shootout with the Cajuns, the men are placed on trial. During the trial, they are comically described as the saddest “bunch of killers,” with most of them injured but only one sustaining a gunshot wound (Gathering 211). This depiction is supposed to provide an ironic and comedic representation of the old men. They do not look like “killers” since, as Gaines makes clear, they are not killers. Furthermore, the trial

13 When the men laugh at themselves and each other, it becomes apparent that Gaines’ portrayal of African American humor shows characters demonstrating that they have not been completely overtaken by racism and economic inequality. For interpretations of humor in Gaines’ works see David C. Estes’ “Gaines’ Humor: Race and Laughter” and Milton Rickels and Patricia Rickels’ “The Sound of My People Talking: Folk Humor in A Gathering.”
is noted as receiving national attention, placing the old men’s feats on a public platform. Particulars of black southern culture amuse unknowing journalists who “laughed” during the men’s testimonies as they referenced one another by nicknames (Gathering 212). The trial offers a platform for the men’s gallantry to become known to the larger public, yet they are viewed as if they had been hired for entertainment. Journalists fail to see the “revolutionary implication” of the men’s actions and behave as if viewing “an old-fashioned minstrel show” (Doyle Voices 201). The court of law becomes a farcical stage upon which these men are made ridiculous.

The courtroom scene bears little similarity to the weightiness defining Jefferson’s trial. Nevertheless, black masculinity on display—where the law is involved—proves similarly problematic. African American men cannot encounter the justice system as individuals not rooted in race. The elderly men become caricatures of black southern culture. When the men’s actions are taken outside the communal realm, their behavior is contextualized using ideology they do not control. That is, in the communal setting, the men’s multi-vocal narration provides the context by which their actions are viewed. The men control the collective space; whereas in the courtroom, the men are placed on “stage” and their narratives are filtered by extraneous people (“journalists,” “Klans,” “Nazi Party,” “NAACP,” “black militants,” Gathering 212) having no association to the community or its struggles. Thus, the men’s story no longer belongs to them.

Losing narrative control accounts for this depiction of the men. They are mostly made ridiculous when controlling structures—whether in the form of Mapes, the judicial system, or powerful organizations—are reiterated. This reality places the men’s actions within the same framework as Joe and Jefferson. All stand up to socioeconomic
structures in place, be it literally or figuratively, but because they do not have access to social and economic power, their resistance becomes secondary to such power or those representing these structures. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, voicing narratives holds as much significance as the men’s stance against Cajuns. Beavers extrapolates on the “public space of utterance” as granting the community power to “exert the will to live in the world on their own terms” (133). The men’s narratives are mostly preoccupied with highlighting injustices they have encountered at the Cajun’s hands. Heretofore wrongdoings had been overlooked—ignored by the justice system and community alike. Voicing injustices breaks cycles of silence and concludes the protracted use of vigilante violence. Silencing these voices and removing the communal context of narration makes the men vulnerable to outside entities.

Ironically, the men appropriate behaviors expected of *men*, but stereotypes of race recast the elderly men’s actions as “astonishing but not serious” (*Gathering* 212). This depiction calls into question the usefulness of mainstream masculine identities for African American men. Whether adhering to homogeneous notions of male identity or not, prescriptions of race presume African American men are unable to fully grasp normative masculinity. Thus, when these men exhibit traits associated with “manliness,” dominant culture uses race to redefine their actions. These men are ensnared in a cycle of masculine identity formation proving too narrow.
RESISTING ESSENTIALIST IDENTITIES

Representations of masculine identity formation respond to mainstream characterizations of African American inferiority. Modified masculine scripts illustrate possibilities available to African American men who choose to confront institutional biases. Because appropriating legitimated identities proved ineffective, Gaines depicts alternatives to this idea. The author does not disavow this type of hetero-normative manhood, as much as he is interested in broadening its depiction. Previously, male characters employed conventional definitions of masculinity as resistance. Adopting legitimated identities, these characters challenge reigning social structures by investing in identities created by those controlling society. It is an explicit act meant to relay that African American men could perform masculine mores deemed acceptable by the dominant group. Yet the African American men are overwhelmed when this group reasserts social classifications that continually assign black men last place.

However, as Gaines’ depiction of identity expands, the author features male characters who practice hetero-normative masculine ideals but are less concerned with gaining acceptance or respect from the controlling group. In effect, as opposed to simply investing in a legitimated masculine identity as a method of resistance, black men develop and perform their own versions of masculinity. Castells labels this type of identity formation as project identity. The project identity is enacted “when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall structure” (8). Project identity supports transformative agendas, but male characters’ desire to amend ingrained masculine discourse creates dilemmas within the community.
Often male characters adopting project identities find themselves at odds with the collective. In choosing resistance as a “vehicle of identity,” Beavers notes that characters also encounter “conversion experiences that loose them from paralyzing circumstances” (101). This process occurs on a largely independent basis, meaning that individuals experience this sort of transformation, while the community remains tied to outdated social codes. For this reason, male characters freed from psychologically limiting constructions of black manhood become ideologically separate from the community. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Ned represents this dilemma. He serves as an exemplary manifestation of reformed black masculinity. His idealized status hinders the longevity of his work and situates Ned more as a sacrificial figure than leader. Whereas Ned’s version of masculinity proves too challenging to replicate, *A Lesson Before Dying* and *A Gathering of Old Men* feature males whose psychological liberation makes them resent the community and their place within the collective. *A Lesson Before Dying* details Grant’s struggle to overcome resentment towards the community while managing self-interests and communal obligations. In the latter novel, Mathu’s manliness has garnered him enough stature to warrant meaningful relationships with powerful whites but has also created militant contempt for his neighbors. These men illustrate how individual masculine resistance deepens partitions between individuals and the community. Therefore, I propose that the individualistic modes of masculine resistance possess no import beyond each individual. Gaines’ layered depiction of resistance demonstrates that masculine opposition by itself proves too limiting if resistance is to have any influence beyond specific individuals.
Man or Myth?

Gainesian heroes are often depicted as idealized embodiments of masculine values. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Ned replicates this characteristic. Though he represents heroism, Ned’s performance of masculinity elevates him so much that he becomes mythologized in community’s narrative as opposed to creating lasting platforms for resistance. Ned becomes Jane’s adopted son after his mother and sister are killed by patrollers searching for recently freed blacks travelling North (*Autobiography* 24). As Ned matures within confines of the plantation community, it becomes apparent that subordinate treatment of African Americans will not suffice.

As a teenager, Ned joins a committee of black soldiers reporting on the poor treatment of blacks in the South (*Autobiography* 76). During Ned’s committee work, he begins his stand against oppressive practices employed by plantation owners after the Civil War. Ned is charged with the task of not only relaying mistreatment of African Americans but of also proposing that blacks leave the South for better treatment (*Autobiography* 75). Such a progressive stance places Ned under surveillance. Both he and Jane know that the wealthy plantation aristocracy relies upon inexpensive black labor and sought to end the African American exodus from the South. This tension culminates when Klansmen assault Jane while questioning her regarding Ned’s whereabouts. Afterwards, Ned and Jane come to realize that he must leave the plantation community.

As an evocation of Gaines’ masculine ideology, Ned’s departure is not a retreat from the onus he has taken as a committee member. The author makes this clear in dialogue between Ned and Jane. They discuss whether Ned should accept certain death by remaining in the South or move North. Though Ned is distraught by the dilemma, he
implies that he will not end his advocacy, telling Jane, “‘I’m doing what I think [is]
right’” (Autobiography 78); as a consequence of this stance, he is not compelled to
succumb to threats from the Klansmen. The significance of this sentiment is
foreshadowed when Ned, distraught at the idea of leaving Jane states, “‘I ought to stay
here and just let them kill me’” (Autobiography 79). Ned shows that he knows the fate of
men who oppose systemic racism and also reveals the capacity to accept such a fate.
Gaines states “whenever my men decide that they will be men regardless of how anyone
else feels, they know that they will eventually die” (CEG 30). Ned’s livelihood depends
on his ability to accept or oppose ill-treatment. If he chooses the former, Ned can remain
within the community; the latter alternative endangers his life. While Ned considers
accepting consequences of continuing committee work, Jane will not allow him to risk
his life (Autobiography 79). She knows that if she tells Ned to leave he will follow her
orders, and thus, Ned’s status as a manifestation of masculine resistance remains
unchallenged. He is not viewed as absconding responsibility for the community; rather,
Ned is seen as dutifully assenting to Jane’s request. However, as Gaines points out, men
decide their own fate, and Ned’s willingness to appease Jane hints that he may not be
fully prepared for risks accompanying resistance.

Departure provides space wherein Ned cultivates the independence and self-
assurance required of Gainesian heroes.14 While absent Ned transitions into the respected
version of black masculinity that becomes his trademark. Jane’s account of Ned’s
physical stature illustrates this change: “He didn’t look nothing like he did when he left
here for Kansas. He was a great big man now. Powerfully built: broad shoulders, thick
neck” (Autobiography 104). Conversely, the adolescent Ned is described as a “Tall, slim,

14 See analysis of Joe Pittman in previous chapter.
handsome black child” (*Autobiography* 76). Ned’s physical transformation juxtaposes past and present, differentiating between the boy who is unprepared for leadership and the powerfully built man whose physical capacity hints at personal competency.

Ned’s developed physique alludes to an overall maturation, in which he returns not only as a physical manifestation of masculinity, but also as a new man representing sociopolitical progress. Whereas committee work involved encouraging African Americans to leave the South, upon returning, Ned’s advocacy takes a more comprehensive stance that involves African Americans asserting their right to remain in the South and be treated fairly. “Professor Douglass,” as Ned is titled, adopts a stance paralleling Frederick Douglass, his namesake.¹⁵ That Douglass freed himself from slavery, was a vocal opponent of racial injustice, and was a man of some scholarship reveals the purpose Ned sought to impose upon the black community. Beavers notes that “Ned has chosen Douglass’s philosophy over the more conciliatory politics of Booker T. Washington” (150). Douglass, unlike Washington, opposed racial hierarchies. As an alternative, Douglass proposed advancement requiring “everybody”—white and black—to work together (*Autobiography* 105). Such a theory of citizenship counters social, economic, and political intimidation enacted by the white ruling class whose reliance on binaries led to the marginalization of African Americans. Beavers interprets Ned’s oppositional stance as understanding “the process of citizenship to be a contestational one” (150). In this sense, Ned’s return to the collective is meant to be transformative.

¹⁵ Carole Grenon’s “Turning Points in Ernest J. Gaines’s The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” deals with this issue stating that Jane’s “ability to name herself is the first symbolic act of defiance against the slavery system” (145). Additionally, Grenon recognizes the act as a “powerful statement against the slavery system that controlled all aspects of her person” (146). Ned is attempting to enact this type of independence—especially in his choice to use Douglass as a surname.
Education is thought to be the most effective route of repositioning the black community’s relation to the dominant group. Therefore, Ned’s interest in Douglass’ doctrine provides the impetus for his school and teachings. Education has the power to transgress societal constructs of race; it is particularly dangerous to the racial hierarchy upheld in the South. During Ned’s final lesson, he takes aim at extant systems of socioeconomic stratification: “I want to see some of my children become lawyers […] [Learning] trade is not all. Working with your hands while the white man write all the rules and laws will not better your lot” (Autobiography 116). This statement calls for revision of communal beliefs designating labor as the most viable means of gaining economic independence. Community members are asked to envision a form of economic and political agency wherein they contribute to the longevity and livelihood of their group.

At this moment, openly declaring such revolutionary ideas begins Ned’s succession as “the one.” Gainesian terminology defines “the one” as a community designated salvific figure. Scholars differ as to the relevancy of Christian theology as it relates to characterizations of “the one.” However, an examination of Ned’s character requires an acknowledgement of both secular and sacred components. James R. Giles’ “Revolution and Myth: Kelley’s A Different Drummer and Gaines’ The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” delineates religious undercurrents of “the one” stating, “Faith in a concept of ‘The One,’ a male appointed by God to lead his people out of the wilderness, dominates most of the novel” (46). That Ned is placed in this elevated position is apparent; the abovementioned lesson is titled “The Sermon at the River” (Autobiography
However, focusing too singularly on Christian overtones limits the sociopolitical scope of Ned’s teachings. At the sociopolitical level of discourse, Ned is radically trying to “envision an alternative paradigm of racial interaction” (Beavers 155). Combining religious and social contingencies of Ned’s leadership more accurately characterizes Ned’s role as “the one.”

Being the chosen leader means that Ned’s leadership makes him a well-known figure and he eventually reencounters the same scrutiny that resulted in his aforementioned departure. Yet, as a man, Ned is not only aware of this scrutiny but also he welcomes it, choosing to express activist ideas on a public platform. In the same sermon where he denounces labor as the only source of vocation, Ned declares his community’s connection and right to land their ancestors’ “bones lay in”: “This earth is yours and don’t let that man out there take it from you. [...] Your people’s bones and their dust make this place more yours than anything else” (Autobiography 112). Ned makes this declaration as the gathering is being watched by two white men. It is his intention that they hear his claims; Ned is not interested in concealing his ideology from the dominant group. Rather, he wants the white men to know that he is not afraid, and also, that he understands the techniques by which African Americans had been systemically denied equality. Lastly, he is intent upon making sure the community understands their absolute right to citizenship that is uninhibited by the ruling class’ agenda. By publically decreeing these ideas in the presence of white onlookers, Ned

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16 Ned’s sermon alludes to Christ’s “Sermon on the Mount. See Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7 in the New Testament.
17 Dolan Hubbard’s “Toward a Definition of the African American Sermon” categorizes sermons as allowing “the preacher and the people to articulate the self, it challenges the dominant culture’s ordering of reality (history)” (5). In African American Christian traditions, clergymen have historically taken on social roles. The Civil Rights Movement is an example of this idea.
implicitly imbues his teachings with importance. In particular, he knows the white men represent vigilante groups but he finds his message too important to be diluted for purposes of appeasing white onlookers. The community understands that Ned is risking his life to share his teachings. These actions make Ned both a transformative leader and socially transgressive figure.

Ultimately, his choice to transgress social boundaries is a sacrifice, which is the most salient feature of “the one” narratives. In Ned’s case, he sacrifices himself for the sake of educating the community. Yet Ned’s role as a single, exemplary model of masculine resistance, and the death that will certainly follow acceptance of said role, provides a rather counterproductive portrayal of opposition. Acting out patriarchal masculinity, particularly for “the one,” is an onus that can only end in death. Beavers states that “What is needed, then, is an individual who is willing to sacrifice him/herself as a way of suggesting that actual death is preferable to social death” (155). Similarly, Davis interprets dying as the ultimate act of dissent: “In effect, that acceptance of death […] frees them to perform an act of social rebellion, an uprising against their treatment and a revolt against imprisoning life in the quarters” (286). These interpretations, along with Gaines’ own remarks on his characters’ mortality, do not delve into the limitations of this type of individual resistance. Namely, individual masculine opposition indelibly tied to death would result in a continuous loss of leadership that stagnates more than advances the community.

The concept of a lone savior delivering the community eventually proves detrimental. Following Ned’s murder no other individual from the community resumed his work. Jane recalls that Ned’s wife wanted to continue his teachings but feared for her
life, and the hired teacher “Didn’t teach what Ned wanted to teach” and left immediately after the school was destroyed by flood (Autobiography 125). Giles classifies the ensuing dilemmas as an outcome of “delegating any one individual the responsibility of saving an entire people” (46). Christian symbols portray the nobility of Ned’s actions, but the unceremonious demise of Ned’s teachings and legacy complicate notions of having an exceptional individual serve as “the one” who will save and redeem the community.

Death not only represents the conclusion of Ned’s work, but also becomes the point at which the hero’s narrative gains permanence within the communal narrative. When Ned prepares to confront Albert Cluveau, the man sent to kill him, “he jumped from his wagon and started running toward Cluveau […] with nothing but his fists” (Autobiography 120-121). Though Ned has essentially chosen his fate, how he dies is controlled by the white men requesting his death. Jane states that “the white people had told Cluveau to make Ned crawl before killing him” (Autobiography 1). Seeing Ned crawl is a final attempt at making him subservient and serves as direct insult to the confident posture he had displayed during his public sermon. However, Ned’s resolve had not been taken into account: “When Cluveau shot him, he fell to one knee, then got back up” (Autobiography 122). This act is an overt message that, as long it was possible, Ned would stand and face adversaries with the courage expected from an exemplary man. Cluveau recognizes Ned’s determination and instead of making him crawl, his last shot “tore off half [Ned’s] chest” (Autobiography 121). Alive, Ned would never submit to Cluveau’s terrorization; death is the only way his tenacity can be subdued.

Ned’s heroism and self-sacrifice garners him immortality as a lasting part of the community’s history, but such a legacy shapes his actions as less human and more a
combination of hyper-masculinity and Christian iconography. Giles highlights parallels between Ned’s death and Christ’s crucifixion. This connection is especially palatable in the aftermath of Ned’s assassination. Jane describes a trail of Ned’s blood that “Even the rain couldn’t wash [...] away”; people from the community are described as wanting to touch Ned’s body; finally, these individuals are noted as “want[ing] a piece of lumber with his blood on it” (Autobiography 121-122). Giles describes Ned and objects associated with his death as “holy relics eagerly sought by the people” (46). That these relics are made sacred by Ned’s blood implicates Ned as a hero/Christ figure. Although casting Ned as a religious figure suggests the impact of his death, such parallels shape qualities of Ned’s leadership as unattainable and unable to be replicated. He is no longer viewed as a man of the people, hoping to better the lives of those in the community; instead, he is recast as a sort of demigod or a figure whose ethos is only attainable through relics of his death.

Resisting Communal Agendas

Facets of A Lesson Before Dying could be read as a critique of the community’s reliance on “the one.” Grant, the local school teacher, bitterly resents the complacency that waiting for “the one” has bred within the community. These feelings support his decision to enact individuated masculine opposition, regardless of its limited influence. Grant is not bothered by the limits of such resistance; rather, his self-interests are more easily maintained without imposition from the collective. When Grant is asked to conduct

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18 In Christian doctrine, the Lord’s Supper features Christ engaging in a symbolic offering of himself to his disciples. 1 Corinthians details that Christ told his followers, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:25). The imbibing of the blood is a reiteration of the chosen one’s sacrifice, and Ned’s blood is procured for similar purposes. Also, Papa Lee’s “‘His feet on your neck’: New Religion in the Works of Ernest J. Gaines” further examines Ned as a Christ-like figure.
Jefferson’s lessons in manhood, he views the commitment as an encumbrance. His role as Jefferson’s teacher creates tension between his self-interested approach to resistance and his ability to act effectively on behalf of the community. Grant’s inability to separate personal pride from the humility needed to perform communal obligations exposes drawbacks of his brand of masculine resistance.

He is initially put off by his aunt and Miss Emma’s request that he teach Jefferson, but Grant understands that he cannot dismiss their demands. As the community’s school teacher, his role extends beyond the classroom—a reality that makes him uncomfortable. When Aunt Lou relays the task at hand, Grant is furious that she extends his professional commitment into a communal obligation: “I had told her many times how much I hated this place and all I wanted to do was get away. I told her that I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was running in place here” (Lesson 15). Such internal conflict foregrounds Grant’s desire to dismiss the community. “What am I doing,” Grant wonders to himself as he realizes that his young male students already emulate the behavior of the community’s older, uneducated men (Lesson 62). This self-awareness makes it difficult to thrive as a member of the stagnated plantation community.19

Beavers proposes that self-awareness transpires from a process of inquiry leading characters to question limits placed on black citizenship in the South. When speaking of the protagonist in Gaines’ “The Sky is Grey,” Beavers observes that “in formulating his life around the act of inquiry, the young man proposes a new way of perception” (52).

19 Facets of Gaines’ biography may serve as the template for Grant’s bitterness; both Gaines and Grant were educated outside the South (CEG ivii; Lesson 63). Grant’s struggle to fit back into the southern hierarchy is an aspect of Gaines’ own experiences. The author recalls how, after moving away from the South as a youth, trying to “act the same” and “accepting certain things […] was just about impossible […] to do” (CEG 32).
New methods of perception allow characters to transgress boundaries of race. Beavers suggests that inquiry is necessary to oppose the “race ritual” prescribing African American citizenship and “forcing black and white to conform to proscribed social roles in a drama that replays itself so many times till all the participants reach the outcome by rote” (52). When Grant examines the young boys’ behavior, he realizes that, though receiving an education, their lives will not differ from those of their elders. Grant’s ability to perceive ills hindering both students’ and his personal progress allows him to recognize fallacies of race rituals and how harsh realities of such mandates influence black life in the South.

A visit to Henri Pichot’s home illustrates roles substantiated by the race ritual. Pichot owns the land where Grant and the rest of the black community reside, and Grant knows that Pichot does not approve of him: “I was too educated for Henry Pichot” (Lesson 21). Therefore, when Grant replies to a question from Pichot without including an honorific title, Pichot “stared” at him until he realized the mistake (Lesson 21). Grant corrects the mishap by attaching an abrupt “Sir” to his remarks, reiterating customary stratifications between a white and black man. Initially Grant does not realize that he has transgressed social prescriptions, which insinuates that he views himself as Pichot’s equal. Equality is not intended to disrespect Pichot as much as it serves as a reminder of the arbitrary quality of race protocols enacted in the South. These conformities thrive because individuals such as Pichot and Grant continue to act them out.

However, Grant’s ability to perform conventions of race is double-sided. Unlike Pichot, Grant understands the arbitrariness of race rituals, and due to this knowledge, possesses the upper hand. The protagonist’s double consciousness becomes a source of
agency. W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks* explains double consciousness as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (9). Du Bois continues, extrapolating on the “two-ness” African Americans feel as “American” and “Negro”: “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood” (9). Grant’s actions reveal a character who has achieved “self-conscious manhood”—he has shown that he views himself as equal to a white man. Further, Grant understands binaries of identity, which permits his choosing to object or perform undesirable social mores. During a subsequent exchange with Pichot and Sheriff Guidry, Grant relays that he would decide how to respond to the men, whether it be showing “too much intelligence” or “a lack of intelligence” (emphasis added; *Lesson 47*). Willingness to perform or refute white expectations is an implication of the cultural and interpersonal dynamics characterizing race rituals. It also demonstrates Grant’s opposition towards established forms of masculinity and authority.

It becomes clear that Grant will not demean himself to uphold the white men’s feelings of superiority. Pichot summons Grant to his home to discuss his lessons with Jefferson, but when Grant arrives he is made to wait while the men finish a meal. He realizes, before the meeting, that they are “doing everything they could to humiliate [him]” (*Lesson 46*). This realization prompts Grant’s decision to speak to the men forthrightly, barring the expected obsequiousness. They ask whether the wait for their arrival had been lengthy—a question meant to further disgrace Grant, considering that he knows they purposefully kept him waiting. Grant realizes that he is supposed to submit unquestioningly to the power being exercised as the men willfully disregard his time: “I was supposed to say, ‘Not long,’ and I was supposed to grin but I didn’t do either”
(Lesson 47). This sort of posturing temporarily disrupts the effectiveness of the race ritual and for the moment solidifies Grant as an oppositional figure. Resistance becomes the way in which characters achieve self-realization, allowing them to view themselves as entities separate from scripts of race. Grant so successfully disrupts the white men’s expectations that Sheriff Guidry states that he was “too smart for [his] own good” (Lesson 49). Being “too smart” is the primary method used to oppose racism and undermine performative race rituals.

Similarly, Grant develops a penchant for resisting the constraints of communal obligation. Yet Grant’s disillusion towards the community prevents any attempt at wholeheartedly opposing racial injustice. Teaching Jefferson presents an opportunity to counter racist constructions of black masculinity, but Grant cannot see past his frustration to recognize the prospect. The women sense Grant’s hesitation and remind him of his role as “the teacher” (Lesson 13). They do not indulge in protracted speeches concerning the role of an educator within the community; it is implied that Grant understands what is expected of him. His response shows that Grant does, in fact, realize expectations of his profession, but deliberately tries to distance himself from becoming too involved. Grant views his occupation as existing outside the parameters of communal responsibility: “I’m the teacher […] And I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach—reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic. They never told me how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store” (Lesson 15). Grant’s statement limits the role of educators and underscores problematic aspects of forging an identity based not only on resisting scripts of race but that also involves taking an adversarial attitude toward the community. Instead of resisting
systemic racism stunting development of young black men, Grant chooses to direct his energy towards being angry at the black community.

Grant’s passive resistance toward the white men has motives besides pushing back at their disrespect. He knows that if he behaves too flippantly they may refuse Miss Emma’s favor, liberating him of any responsibility to the community. For example, during his conversation with Guidry, Grant uses standard grammar versus the black southern dialect the white men anticipate (Lesson 48). Grant knows that he is being “too smart” but he explains he had done this intentionally, hoping that Guidry’s exasperation would thwart his having to visit Jefferson.

Grant’s actions highlight tensions concerning leadership roles African American men are expected to hold within black communities as opposed to their low standing in mainstream society. As a reluctant leader, Grant has to endure Pichot’s emasculation, and, as a man, such humiliation proves intolerable. This creates paradox of masculinity that complicates resistance towards white patriarchy. On one hand, if Grant responds to the white men’s degradation, he jeopardizes the work he has been asked to do on behalf of the community. On the other hand, if he behaves according to stipulations of the race hierarchy, Grant’s self-esteem and pride are at stake. Consequently, behaving too intelligently is the scheme Grant employs to sabotage commitments to ideologies belonging to black and white communities.

In Grant’s circumstance, demonstrating acute understanding of racial conventions—and thereby refuting white ideas regarding black male inferiority—reveals the significance of his personal stake, as opposed to concern for communal well-being. Grant’s need to prove himself makes it difficult to renounce self-interest. This is mostly
evident in Grant’s refusal to placate the elderly women and minister’s request that he lead Jefferson to Christian salvation. Grant’s tenuous relationship with Christianity is well-known, but the women and minister notice his influence over Jefferson. Still, Grant categorizes his teachings as “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” At this point, this excuse has less meaning than when it is stated at the novel’s beginning.

Grant feels unqualified to offer religious guidance, mostly because he opposes what he understands as Christianity’s tenet of submission. William R. Nash’s “‘You Think a Man Can’t Kneel and Stand?’: Ernest Gaines’ Assessment of Religion as Positive Communal Influence in A Lesson Before Dying” observes a common thread in Gaines’ work wherein ministers are characterized by an “adherence to Christ and a concomitant social passivity that ultimately proves unacceptable” (346). This characterization influences Grant’s attitude toward not only religion, but Reverend Ambrose as well; and again, Grant finds himself in a position where his stance against emasculation pits him against the community. He does not yet realize that Ambrose is asking him, just as he asks Jefferson, to do “something for other people.” When Ambrose suggests that he “[t]ell Jefferson to fall down on his knees” before his death, Grant makes it clear that teaching Jefferson to kneel is counterproductive (Lesson 216). He reiterates that he was asked to make sure Jefferson dies standing as a man.

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20 See Gathering 100-102.
21 While visiting Jefferson as a group, Ambrose and the women observe Grant’s sway over Jefferson. Initially Jefferson reacts coolly to his visitors, and most insulting to his godmother, he refuses to eat her cooking (Lesson 189-190). Mainly, refusing food cooked by his godmother is viewed as a rejection. Doyle observes that the elderly women’s love “is expressed by services, especially provision of food” (Voices 211). Implicit in Jefferson’s rejection of his godmother’s food, is a slight rebellion against her dictate that he be made a man. However, Grant speaks with Jefferson and explains the significance of his death. Jefferson is told that he has the chance to be a “hero,” which Grant defines as “someone who does something for other people” (Lesson 191). The “something” that Jefferson can do begins with his godmother, if he will only eat her food—or accept her love. Once Jefferson stops rejecting Miss Emma, and by extension the obligation she places upon him, his stand against fabrications of black male inferiority begins.
In this capacity, kneeling is seen as further subjugating Jefferson to the system wrongly sentencing him to death. Standing evokes “images of power and the ability to assert one’s selfhood—a strength that comes when one has developed personal awareness and security” (Nash 352). Yet Grant does not comprehend that, for African American men, especially those living in rural southern communities, values of hetero-normative masculinity cannot subsist separate from communal values. To be the man the community elders want him to be, Grant must learn to respect the dignity in subduing one’s pride for the greater good of the collective. Standing involves a bit of subservience—not to race hierarchies hindering black men, but to the community.

Ambrose, unlike Grant, understands this notion of standing and asks Grant, “‘You think a man can’t kneel and stand?’” (Lesson 216). By Ambrose’s definition, kneeling is not debilitating as much as it is an unselfish act providing Jefferson’s Aunt Emma some solace. Whereas Grant’s limited perspective does not allow him to view kneeling as having any consequence other than emasculation, Ambrose recognizes how important Jefferson’s salvation is to his godmother. “‘Tell [Jefferson],’” Ambrose says, “‘to fall on his knees [before] her’” (Lesson 216). Ambrose is not asking Grant to proselytize; he is requesting that Grant make this appeal for Miss Emma’s sake.

Grant has not yet internalized aspects of heroism that he earlier stressed to Jefferson. The reverend highlights this, noting that Grant’s academic education does not necessarily equate to knowledge. Ambrose questions Grant: “‘What did you learn about your own people? […] You don’t even know yourself’” (Lesson 215). The reverend implies that “education” is not limited to academic achievement, but also encompasses an understanding of the community. More particularly, education encompasses the ability to
comprehend communal suffering. In addition, manhood involves undertaking action necessary to relieve suffering. Grant has yet to learn that black masculinity is not as simple as re-appropriating patriarchal values; it involves learning how to both stand against oppression and kneel for one’s community. Beavers extends the idea that Grant’s character “suggests the dangers inherent in the assertion of a fierce individualism that attempts to achieve its ends at the community’s expense” (229). Such independence proves difficult as Gaines’ portrayals of resistance begin to take shape around communal action.

Problematizing Militant Resistance

The idea of independent resistance yielding to communal action is explored further in *A Gathering of Old Men*. In this novel, Gaines features Mathu, a character sharing Grant’s individualism. Mathu must also come to reconcile accepted representations of masculinity with the manner by which African American men in his community have chosen to perform manhood. This contrast grounds Mathu’s disdain towards the black men of the community. Thus, Mathu becomes a self-imposed outcast and a militant example of traditional masculinity: “[He] was the only one [who] had ever stood up” (*Gathering* 31). The narrative’s conflict centers on Mathu’s singular ability to “stand up.” Problems arise after the murder of Beau Bouton whose father, Fix, is the leader of a group of vigilante Cajuns. Beau’s death takes place on Mathu’s property, leading to the assumption that he has committed the crime. In order to prevent inevitable retaliation from Fix and his group, the plantation’s heiress asks a group of elderly African American men to gather at Mathu’s home to assert their guilt.
Mathu marks the most prominent demonstration of an individual reincorporating into the community. He eventually admits the failings of individualistic opposition. More specifically, Mathu acknowledges the disadvantages of militancy. He learns that independent resistance is incomparable to support received when the community finally decides to rally against oppression. Mathu’s narrative continues to underscore deterrents of masculine opposition as the primary means of effecting change and begins to emphasize the ways in which community proves valuable if resistance is to be efficient.

The gathering at Mathu’s home is an unusual show of courage and solidarity. Doyle explains that prior to standing up to the Cajuns, “the old men have seen themselves and their race in stereotype, as oppressed, terrified, and helpless before whites” (176). Beau’s murder, however, is the moment at which these men decide that they will no longer act as typecasts. They have achieved Gaines’ brand of humanity, which is based primarily upon one’s ability to approximate some sense of manly dignity. Gaines explains the association between masculinity and humanity stating, “Manliness is that moment when it is necessary to be human—it’s at that moment when you refuse to back down” (CEG 241). Mathu, unlike the other elderly men, has always asserted his humanity—a feat that lends to his veneration.

When Mathu’s masculinity, or humanity, is challenged he is willing to fight for its redemption. Chimley, one of the African American men gathered at Mathu’s home, details a physical altercation between Mathu and Fix caused by the latter ordering Mathu to dispose of a finished soda bottle (Gathering 30). Race hierarchies establish Fix—though Cajun—as Mathu’s better, and when told to dispose of Fix’s waste Mathu is expected to comply. However, Mathu does not assume the cowed posture of the
community’s other black men. He makes it known that “if Fix started anything, he was go’n protect himself” (Gathering 30). When the foreseeable confrontation began, Mathu and Fix went “toe to toe,” but at the end Mathu is the last man standing (Gathering 30). Their physical confrontation removes haphazard social and ideological constructs of race and masculinity, allowing the men to engage on a more basic level. This seems an intentional aspect of Gaines’ characterization of Mathu. That is, Mathu is a character whose masculinity allows him to transcend racial prescriptions.

Because Mathu performs masculinity in a way that makes him equal to or better than white men, he is granted status and respect beyond the African American community. This is most evident in the close relationships he has with whites occupying positions of power. Mathu directly challenges Fix and wins but he also escapes repercussions of such behavior. Chimley recalls how afterwards “the white folks wanted to lynch Mathu” but were prevented from doing so by the sheriff at the time (Gathering 30). Similarly, Mathu’s relationship with Mapes, the current sheriff, is also noted: “[Mapes] liked Mathu. To him Mathu was a real man” (Gathering 84). Essentially, Mathu’s admirable appropriation of masculine mores has granted him both respect and protection. Unlike the other older black men, Mathu has relationships with those who are not only a part of the dominant class but also protect it. Although socioeconomic standards do not allow Mathu’s full inclusion into this power structure, his performance of masculinity offers leverage above other men from the black community.

Higher status is used as grounds for Mathu to separate himself from other African American men. Beavers explains that Mathu has “held himself apart from the other men in the quarters because of their cowardice” (171). Likewise, Doyle argues that Mathu
“cannot enjoy life with blacks whose cowardice he despises” (*Voices* 176). His relationship with Mapes shows the extent of Mathu’s disgust. He would rather associate with the sheriff—a man charged with maintaining collective welfare but who allows Cajuns to terrorize African Americans. This intimates that Mathu’s view of the elderly black men proves no different from whites creating ideology leading to characterizations of black men as ineffectual representations of masculinity. It is impossible for him to perform as a model patriarchal masculinity while maintaining meaningful connections with the black community.

The fact that Mathu is an exemplary man is continually reiterated, but smaller, more telling details depict a man whose masculinity is less grounded in humanity than in misguided militancy. Mathu’s dilemma centers mostly on the idea that he performs mainstream masculinity a bit too well. His voice is largely absent in the novel’s multi-vocal narration, relying on others to compose his character. Aspects of Mathu’s personality are revealed when the elderly men begin to verbalize their historical connections to the place and recount how Cajun vigilante violence has impacted each of their lives. This moment is meant to represent the group’s unity, which had heretofore been plagued by internal conflicts such as skin color (*Gathering* 44-46).22 “The negations that have shaped their lives,” Beavers concludes, “become sites of affirmation because they enter the realm of narration” (167). Affirmative narration bolsters their collective resolve, and as result, individual narration progresses into communal narration. Collective narration begins with a single person detailing his experience. The speaker usually relies on his neighbors for affirmation. Yet Mathu is noticeably silent, indicating

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22 Joseph Griffin’s “Creole and Singaleese: Disruptive Caste in *Catherine Carmier* and *A Gathering of Old Men*” offers an interesting analysis of racial castes.
his continued desire to remain an outsider. Rufe, one of the newly courageous men, notes that Yank’s “weak eyes” sought Mathu for narrative vindication but was met with an apathetic nod: “[Mathu] didn’t say a thing, didn’t even look down at him, just nodded” (Gathering 98). Not only is Mathu’s response non-verbal but it is also dismissive and impersonal, negating any familiarity Yank attempts to establish between he and Mathu. Also, the narrator’s mention of Yanks’ weak, pleading eyes implies that Mathu’s disinterest was perhaps a purposeful snub of Yank’s fragile display of masculinity.

Mathu is situated as a paragon of black manhood, but his militant hubris illustrates the faulty aspects of such an example. Gaines explains militancy as a valid representation of the African American experience but notes that it lacks “any lasting force unless one knows himself” (CEG 75). This notion of belligerency frustrates Mathu’s interactions with the community—he knows himself, but he does not know himself in relation to the group. The community traditionally operates as a sustaining force against perils accompanying the racial hierarchy, and when individuals such as Grant and Mathu separate themselves, identity crisis ensues. Characters are forced to confront detachment and eventually reassert their place within the group. As Mathu realizes his respect for the men, he comes to understand that separation can no longer sustain him: “‘Till a few minutes ago, I felt the same way that [white] man out there felt about y’all—you never would ’mount to an ything. But I was wrong. And he’s still wrong. ’Cause he ain’t go’n ever face the fact. But now I know. And I thank y’all. And I look up to you. Every man in here. And this the proudest day of my life’” (Gathering 181). Mathu’s restored connection to the community redirects misguided hostility. His warranted disdain of racism and terrorism is not quelled: when a member of the white
vigilante violence group shows up to avenge Beau Bouton’s death, Mathu readily hands Charlie his gun so that he can defend himself (Gathering 194). However, Mathu’s frustration is redirected in a way that supports the community as opposed to offering condemnation. Beavers recognizes this transition as Mathu entering a “space in which he simultaneously discovers individual citizenship and communal ties” (171). Thus, this change marks Mathu’s transition from complete individuality toward an identity shaped by connections to the community.

A Lesson Before Dying concludes with Jefferson’s execution, and as show of solidarity Grant makes his students kneel as “the appropriate response to this moment of communal suffering” (Nash 354). In this moment Grant understands that kneeling is not simply an act of submission; it is an obligation of humanity requiring members of the community to recognize loss known and felt by the collective. Humanity is not sacrificial, separatist, or gender specific; it encompasses struggles of both men and women, young and old. Though Gaines asserts that manliness is the moment when it is necessary to be human, as examinations of resistance are broadened, Gaines’ notions of humanity are separated from masculinity and attention to collective humanity moves to the forefront. Masculinity cannot single-handedly transform prescriptions of race that affect the community as a whole. Illustrations of sacrifice, self-interests, and self-righteousness reveal tensions occurring as an outcome of personal agendas that cannot accommodate broader ambitions.
CREATING COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

Shortcomings of masculine resistance refocus Gaines’ idea of gendered opposition. Although the author’s notion of resistance prioritizes maturation of male characters, limits placed upon the performance of hetero-normative masculinity prohibits the scope of such resistance and reinforces communal identity as the most valuable option available to African American men. A more rounded depiction of opposition emerges, especially as the concept is shown to be more inclusive. To expand Gaines’ depiction of resistance, I employ Davis’ analysis of oppositional space in the author’s works. Davis concludes that Gaines’ fiction “is less about articulating stances of resistance than about forging oppositional space—essentially of articulating a third space, a space different from much of the history for people of color existing in Louisiana’s plantation culture” (286). I put forward the “oppositional” space as communal, created by the resistance of both men and women for the preservation and advancement of the community.

Specifically, in The Autobiography of Jane Pittman, A Lesson Before Dying, and A Gathering of Old Men, female involvement is an important aspect of the oppositional space. I suggest that the female presence ultimately makes resistance communal rather than masculine. To explain, Thomières surmises that “a social group held in bondage can make progress only if it doesn’t antagonize those who are stronger than it is” (220). Thomières expounds on this idea, explaining that men who chose to “stand” against oppression versus understanding “how far [they] can safely go,” find themselves destroyed by systemic racism (220). “Man’s way,” as Jane is warned by a conjure woman, is “To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove he is a man”
(Autobiography 97). On the other hand, Gaines’ women are not iconoclast like their male counterparts; they are not seeking to enact the sort of social disruption often accompanying male resistance. Women are also not seeking leadership roles; rather, they have learned to navigate boundaries of race and gender in a ways that ultimately benefit the collective. This sometimes involves adhering to gender norms requiring black women to be both assertive and passive. Manipulating constraints of gender and race creates the female inhabited oppositional space as most effective for making resistance an enduring aspect of communal identity. As Thomières acknowledges, masculine based resistance often antagonizes or proves too challenging to the dominant group’s social codes. Women, however, know how to achieve their goals without seeming to pose too much a threat to extant systems. In this way, the female presence is necessary to maintain the community and its values.

The women serving as the focus of my research are elderly black women who have spent their lives awaiting societal transformation. Gaudet’s “Black Women: Race, Gender, and Culture in Ernest Gaines’ Fiction” categorizes these women as “Aunt” figures (140). “Aunts” are elderly women with no biological offspring raising children related by family ties or a part of a network of fictive kinship. “The older women,” Gaudet acknowledges, “generally seem to have a confidence and sense of place within their community that the men lack” (141). Ultimately, I propose that the female sense of community makes the oppositional space most effective for communal resistance, leading to the formation of a collective identity. Establishing and maintaining communal values proves the most productive means of solidifying resistance as an effective component of collective identity. This objective involves exploring the ways by which women adapt
opposition to changing environments, interrupt efforts of community members who attempt to hinder opposition, and enforce rootedness as a method of resistance.

As in previous chapters, I utilize one of Castells’ three forms of identity construction as the framework for communal identity. This chapter will focus on resistance identity, which is “generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” (Castells 8). That is, by methods of resistance, alienated groups form an identity based on principles meant to counter oppression generated by those holding dominant or essentialist identities.

Maneuvering Mechanisms of Resistance

Women are arbiters of communal survival because they acclimatize to varied, unexpected circumstances. Though ensuring collective prosperity is the main concern of female characters, Jane is initially an interesting departure from this norm. Women in *A Lesson Before Dying* and *A Gathering of Old Men* enter into set narratives capturing a very specific moment of conflict. However, Jane’s narrative, as mentioned, includes incidents occurring over a century, and thus, readers see how her character evolves. For instance, in her youth, Grenon characterizes Jane as appropriating “masculine authority” (148). The patience characterizing Jane’s adulthood, evolved from adolescence where she is described as “nothing but trouble” (10). Trouble, as Grenon observes, is Jane’s appropriation of the public space. Norton echoes Grenon’s conjecture regarding gendered spaces, noting that “women are typically relegated to the private domain or to limited

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23 Elaine Buster’s “The Concept of the Hero in Southern Literature” traces Jane’s evolution into a heroic figure using concepts of heroes outlined in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Michael Kreyling’s *The Figure of the Hero in Southern Narrative.*
opportunities in the public domain” (301). The public domain belongs to men, and Jane is considered deviant not only because she does not accept such boundaries, but also her behavior in the public space mimics that of men. In public, Jane willingly engages in physical confrontation; she is not shy about vocalizing her opinions. Lastly, Jane has the aforementioned masculine urge for independence outside the community\(^{24}\) (Autobiography 11-16). These actions make Jane an outcast among the collective.

Eventually Jane outgrows this type of behavior. Perhaps the idea of a woman taking on stereotypically male behaviors is meant to be problematic. Male characters’ confrontational, independent approach to communal life results in either alienation or death. For Jane, as a woman and preserver of community, intrinsic self-interest characterizing such actions cannot remain lasting features of her character. Preserving the community requires that women place communal values ahead of pride.

When Jane becomes Ned’s adoptive mother, she is called to reconsider her self-interests. This circumstance abates the naiveté of adolescence and Jane transitions into the feminine realms of community and kinship. Ned’s mother is killed while she, Jane, and a group of newly freed slaves attempt to travel north. Jane and Ned are the only survivors, and she is determined to walk to Ohio with Ned in tow. Jane’s resolve does not falter until she meets an old man who tells her that she is going in the wrong direction: “I felt like crying. But I asked myself what would happen to Ned. He was holding up only because I was holding up. If I broke down he had nobody to guide him” (Autobiography 51). The realization that Jane, a child herself, is responsible for another, even younger child is not ignored. In this moment Ned’s safety is as important, if not more important,

\(^{24}\) See analysis of Joe Pittman in chapter one.
than her own. Jane has not yet given up her desire to travel north, but Ned’s presence makes her consider the consequences of such a journey.

Jane’s desire to travel north nullifies her ability to rejoin the southern rural black community. Similar to Joe, Jane feels that self-worth cannot be maintained in an environment where she was formerly enslaved. Appropriating the masculine public sphere allows Jane to search for an identity not tied to the community, which, to an adolescent Jane, represents white dominance and black servility. The southern rural community evokes her slave past, and the north symbolizes a future where Jane believes this past will no longer matter. Jane has taken on an identity that she feels is rooted in the northern place. This is a result of Jane being renamed by Corporal Brown, a Yankee soldier, who takes a liking to her. Corporal Brown gives her the name Jane—he found Ticey, her slave name, distasteful (Autobiography 8). Solidifying this new identity requires moving north. Grenon adds that “With a new identity and a new name, Jane has to reinvent her life literally” (146). The north provides the space for such reinvention, yet Jane had not planned on assuming guardianship of Ned.

Jane serving as an adopted mother not only establishes her place within the female sphere, but also provides the “pauses” needed to reiterate connections to the southern place and community. According to Tuan, “Place is a pause in movement,” and “pause makes it possible for a locality to become a center of felt value” (138). In her travels, Jane constantly pauses to ask for guidance or to let Ned rest (Autobiography 49-57). During these stops Jane meets people who remind her that she has not left the South and who also reinforce the South as a place where communal identity thrives. Whether aided by blacks or whites, for the most part Jane and Ned receive sustenance from these
individuals. Their journey concludes when one of these pauses results in Jane finding employment and a permanent home for her and Ned. Jane’s desire to leave the South subsides and she takes the opportunity to return to the familiarity of field work. Her employer is initially doubtful of Jane’s ability to handle the intensity of such labor, but she asserts her capacity to handle the work load: “That’s the only place I been” (*Autobiography* 62). This marks the first time Jane references her past. She not only references the past, but implicitly acknowledges that the past has importance in the present. Jane is no longer separating herself from who she once was but relies upon former experiences to improve her present condition. More specifically, this moment marks the end of Jane’s presumably masculine desire for autonomy, and she accepts her former place as a member of the collective. Accepting this position is not meant to constrain her; instead, this specific pause in movement becomes permanent due in part to the economic opportunity Jane finds in this place.

The abrupt end of Jane’s journey towards a new locale and identity borders on submission. That is, Jane does not struggle with the return to the past; she unceremoniously resigns ambitions to move to the North. Scholars such as Thomières and Babb agree that Jane’s character could be read as submissive or indifferent (220; 84). Willingness to accept circumstances outside her control brands Jane as apathetic, but such indifference is actually a “protective psychological mechanism” (Babb 84). Jane’s concern is survival and she fully understands that survival sometimes necessitates brusque, unexpected change that is required when survival is one’s main goal. The psychological fortitude needed to live life in such a way should not be regarded as
submissive. Jane is preserving herself, as a means of preserving Ned. This sort of selfless maneuvering makes women’s roles in resistance fundamental.

Similar to Jane’s psychological resolve, Aunt Lou and Miss Emma from *A Lesson Before Dying* exhibit the same selflessness on behalf of loved ones. These women are “Aunts” who have raised young men. Aunt Lou’s nephew, Grant, attended college and came back to the community to teach. Jefferson’s godmother, Miss Emma, raised him after his parents “‘dropped him when [he] wasn’t nothing’” (*Lesson* 224). They do not occupy the masculine sphere as blatantly as Jane does in her youth. The benefits of age and experience allow these women to appropriate masculine space while typifying appropriate gender and race norms. Aunt Lou and Emma present a more traditional portrayal of femininity. Babb echoes this sentiment, noting that “Gaines’ women provide the nurture that enables individual, familial, and communal survival” (77). They do not seek to be leaders; mainly, their objective is nurturing their nephews and adoptive sons to lead the community. However, this aim does not place them in secondary roles. In fact, these women bring about the changes necessary to make both Jefferson and Grant leaders. This is where their psychological endurance comes into play.

The women patiently exercise their “protective psychological mechanisms,” but when the moment arrives, they know that they must act. Jefferson’s death sentence provides the opportunity. At Jefferson’s trial, his attorney uses Miss Emma’s desperation to spare Jefferson’s life: “‘Take this away from her, and she has no reason to go on living. We may see him as not much, but he’s her reason for living’” (*Lesson* 8). Ironically, the attorney’s statements are meant to appeal to the jury’s sympathy, but it is soon made clear that these statements are not an exaggeration. Jefferson’s conviction
cracks the protective psychological barrier and Miss Emma’s face “showed all the pain […] from many years past” (*Lesson 13*). For Miss Emma, passivity is no longer an option; her despair is no longer ignorable. The moment has arrived and it is time for her to act. Deciding to oppose systemic prejudice requires Miss Emma to maintain the resolve that had heretofore concealed her pain. She understands that she is still in a position of limited power. With this knowledge she is able to humbly, though forcefully, approach white men for favors.

Thomières’ statement that black women know how to effectively push back against systemic prejudice is exemplified in the actions of Miss Emma and Aunt Lou. Whereas Grant decides to preface responses to white men based on whether he felt like acting out expected race roles, Miss Emma’s interactions with Henri Pichot show that she remains tied to these roles. Miss Emma cooked for multiple generations of the Pichot family, beginning with Pichot’s parents (*Lesson 18*). Yet Henri Pichot greets her as “Emma,” displaying familiarity that even her husband had not taken (*Lesson 21*). Miss Emma does not have the choice of referring to the younger man, whom she cared for as a child, as anything but “Mr. Henri.” However, subtleties of the race ritual do not affect Miss Emma as they did Grant. The elderly woman understands that her purpose is bigger than whether or not Pichot’s form of address shows her proper respect. This knowledge sustains her when Pichot behaves dismissively after she requests that Grant be allowed to teach Jefferson. Though Miss Emma’s psychological reserve is cracked, it is not completely broken and she politely reminds Pichot that “she has done a lot for [his] family over the years” (*Lesson 20*). This statement serves almost as a battle cry. Every time Pichot rebuffs Miss Emma’s request, she reiterates her proven devotion to his
family. Miss Emma does not overstep her boundaries but she wants Pichot to understand that she deserves this favor. This understanding keeps Miss Emma from debasing herself. She does not beg Pichot, but she uses the race ritual to achieve a higher goal.

Mostly, Gaines’ portrayals of women do not defy gender norms as much as show the manipulation required to thrive amidst harsh circumstances. The author cosigns this idea with an interviewer, who acknowledges the power of black women: “Your women act more, they go further” (CEG 40). The interviewer and Gaines agree that women, in Gaines’ novels in particular, were more able to oppose mistreatment than men. “Black women,” the interviewer proclaims, “have had more opportunity to act (as the dominant member of the family, the mother, for instance). The woman can act, whereas the man is kept from acting” (CEG 40). These statements oversimplify complicated ways by which gender dynamics impact male and female resistance. Miss Emma’s detailed maneuvering of race and gender roles seems small when compared to existential feats of masculinity in Gaines’ works. However, it is because these women choose to resist in minor ways that they are able to act as often and effectively as they do.

At times, minor feats of resistance involve circumstances requiring women to resist by doing nothing. Thomières explains that man’s need to assert himself is often accompanied by potential disorder that could be detrimental to the group. Men sometimes “have to be sacrificed if peace is to be maintained in the community” (Thomières 223). These circumstances require women to accept the sacrificial deaths of men they love and nurture, while ensuring that their loved ones do not die in vain. For example, while Miss Emma visits Pichot, she makes it known that she is not fighting to save Jefferson’s life: “I’m not begging for his life no more; that’s over. I just want to see him die like a man”
(Lesson 22). Jane expresses a similar sentiment when she is made aware of Ned’s impending death. Furthermore, Jane is friends with Cluveau, the man hired to kill Ned. As a friend, Cluveau decides to tell Jane that he had been appointed to murder her adopted son. Jane is so flabbergasted that the man she considered a friend could assassinate her son. She remembers “screaming” but Jane soon realized that she “wasn’t making any noise” (Autobiography 111). Jane’s silent rage foreshadows the approach she takes towards Ned. She does not explicitly tell him about Cluveau’s warning; instead, she warns him to “beware of Albert Cluveau” (Autobiography 111). Jane knows she could prevent Ned’s teaching, as she had done previously, but she does not stop him from sharing his principles for communal uplift. Because Jane and Miss Emma accept death, they allow events to unfold that make Ned and Jefferson emblems of courage.

Thwarting Wayward Community Members

Jane and Miss Emma are exemplars of women struggling against hegemony, but preserving communal values can also mean that the women have to struggle against members of the community. Grant and Aunt Lou’s relationship highlights this sort of conflict. Grant’s bitterness makes him antagonistic toward Aunt Lou, but she pays no attention to his behavior. She knows that she holds the advantage in all of their exchanges.25 Details about Grant’s life reveal that he was raised by Aunt Lou after his parents moved to California (Lesson 104). Attachment to Aunt Lou and the community motivates Grant’s return (Lesson 94). However, Grant’s bitterness at what he interprets as communal apathy prompts his negative response to Miss Emma and Aunt Lou. Still, Grant knows that he cannot say no to the aunt who supported his education (Lesson 18-

25 Gaines’ biography provides the template for Grant and Aunt Lou’s relationship. Gaines’ parents moved to California when he was a teenager, leaving him in the care of a beloved aunt until he was fifteen (“Materials” 85; Gaudet and Wooten 130).
19; 63) and took care of him when his parents “left [him] with her for greener pastures” 
(Lesson 167). Grant passively protests rather than flatly denies the women’s request. For 
instance, he purposefully runs over ruts in the road leading to Pichot’s home, causing 
Aunt Lou and Miss Emma discomfort (Lesson 19). Grant is angry that he has been asked 
to be a part of what he perceives as a useless undertaking that results in his humiliation. 
Aunt Lou cannot make Grant understand that Jefferson’s death sentence is not “‘just 
another day’” (Lesson 17). Grant is so concerned with his own humiliation that he does 
not seem to care that the elderly women are also humiliated by this visit. A visibly tired 
Miss Emma goes into the home where she worked for many years and has to stand 
because the white men had not offered her a seat. Aunt Lou is described as having “put 
her arm around [Miss Emma’s] shoulders to […] help her stand” (Lesson 20). In order to 
realize their objective, the women stand together and support each other amidst 
opposition from both Grant and Pichot.

Just as Miss Emma refuses to accept Pichot’s rebuttals, Aunt Lou does not allow 
Grant to reject their favor. In a sense, Aunt Lou’s determination supersedes Grant’s 
reluctance, primarily through her ability to negate his voice. Grant cannot respond to 
Miss Emma’s assertions that “‘he don’t have to do it’”—as in Grant does not have to 
teach Jefferson if he desires not to do so (Lesson 13). Before Grant can reply to Miss 
Emma, Aunt Lou answers: “‘He go’n do it’” (Lesson 14). Grant’s wariness is no match 
for Aunt Lou’s commitment to the cause, and eventually her resolve renders Grant 
voiceless. He continues to protest but she ignores his rants “as though [he] had not said a 
word” (Lesson 14). Because Grant is alienated from the community, his protests have no 
bearing on the communal voice evoked by the elderly women. He does not have a say in
matters concerning the collective and is left to vent his frustrations internally: “I wanted to scream at my aunt; I was screaming on the inside” (*Lesson* 14). At this point, Grant’s voice is useless, his frustrations do not matter, and the women have stopped listening.

Ignoring Grant’s complaints are the elderly women’s way of extracting due penance. Grant has been supported by the women since youth. As noted, Aunt Lou and Miss Emma supported his education, and while teaching in the quarters Grant lives in his aunt’s home. Beavers asserts that Grant “has bled valuable resources out of the community and […] made no commitment to replace them” (176). Grant continues to benefit from the very support he wants to deny Jefferson. However, the women have decided that it is time for Grant to compensate, and his refusal cannot be accepted.

Aunt Lou’s influence is tied to the continued support she has given Grant. Though he gripes about teaching Jefferson, Grant understands that everything he has achieved up until this point has been an effort to make his aunt proud. He relays this sentiment to Vivian, stating that as a teacher “[he] can give them something that neither a husband, a father, nor grandfather ever did” (*Lesson* 167). Grant knows that he is a source of pride for the community, and this would not be the case without the support received from his aunt.

However, Grant seems frustrated, not only by the sense of duty Aunt Lou thrusts upon him, but also by her method of coercion. She forces him into this task and uses the same manipulations she employed while working in service of whites: “My aunt knew how to make you feel that she was of lower and caste and you were being too kind to her. That was the picture she presented, but not nearly how she felt” (*Lesson* 115). Doyle observes that Grant “grudgingly admires [Aunt Lou’s] determined use of similar tactics
to get what they want from whites” (Voices 211). When confronted with the same tactics, Grant is aware of this strategy but is no less the victim.

Tension between Aunt Lou and Grant illustrates how female resistance operates. Whether black or white, those opposing resistance are treated with the same manipulations used to circumvent whites. These individuals are treated as outsiders until they decide to return to the collective. Ultimately, their return to the group is the desired goal. The women do not wish to alienate members of the community, but they must also safeguard the group.

Those who do not wish to take part in communal resistance are potentially hazardous to its objective, and women play a major role in weeding out these people. *A Gathering of Old Men* features women who engage in this sort of work. Beulah, the wife of one of the elderly men, attends the vigil at Mathu’s home, and confronts Reverend Jameson who is steadfastly against confronting the Cajuns. Beulah and the other women present appropriate the aforementioned public/masculine space. In this masculine domain, they, comparable to a young Jane, adopt behavior similar to their male contemporaries. However, their implementation of such behavior is mostly a means of defending the collective resistance.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, communal narration sustains the collective, and Beulah emerges as a proponent of maintaining narration. Beavers describes Gaines’ characters as encountering “upheaval,” but “by bringing it into the public space of utterance, they find themselves empowered rather than entrapped” (133). Jameson, though, interrupts communal storytelling to address Sheriff Mapes. He pleads with the sheriff to put an end to the elderly men’s stand. Beulah seeks to reestablish collective
power, telling the reverend to “shut up” (Gathering 105). Beulah’s injunction creates a narrative break analogous to that of Jameson’s interruption. Yet her goal is to eliminate narration that does not empower the community. Similar to Aunt Lou, Beulah succeeds at diminishing Jameson’s voice to the point that he is nearly inaudible. When Jameson re-enters the narrative space, he spoke “so quiet you couldn’t hardly hear him” (Gathering 106). Voices of dissent have no place within the collective.

A woman silencing a reverend is usually “unheard of,” especially when that woman is an “older black woman” (Doyle Voices 182). The function of religion is an important source for scholarship concerning Gaines’ novels. Particularly, Nash surmises, when referencing elderly female characters: “Much of the old women’s strength comes from their religion, a character trait that links them to other elderly people in Gaines’ corpus” (348). Nash touches on the presumption that religion breeds subservience, and Jameson’s character upholds this depiction. Before seeking the sheriff’s help, Jameson’s disruption begins with religious entreaties. Beulah’s confrontation is not only intended to silence Jameson, but she is also attempting to “cast off all past symbols of subservience” (Doyle Voices 182). Jameson is a symbol of submission that has no place within communal opposition. By silencing him, Beulah creates the space to form a new communal religion, wherein belief in a higher power is no longer necessary. The men gain self-confidence and do not need an entity outside of themselves to effect change. Mathu provides an example of this new religion: “I been changed. Not by that white man’s God. I don’t believe in that white man’s God. I been changed by y’all” (Lesson 183). Interestingly, the “y’all” Mathu refers to does not reference Beulah or any of the women present. Though Beulah takes part in creating the space for new religion to
emerge, she remains unaccredited. This begs the question of whether Beulah has created a space that she and the other women cannot occupy.

Can women act in ways “unheard of” on behalf of the collective, while still remaining a vital part of the collective? The answer appears to be no. And again, women seem comfortable with this reality. Beulah seems to understand that she can actively participate in communal resistance and appropriate the public domain when needed, without dominating the narrative. That is, Beulah can act in both masculine and feminine spheres, whichever is called for, as long as these transitions occur for benefit of the community.

Furthermore, she cannot remain in the masculine sphere; female characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* always return to their subsidiary role. This is not negatively viewed by the women. Beavers identifies those engaging in public speaking for the sake of the community as “vessels.” In this role, individuals are tasked “to render the people, not [themselves] visible” (Beavers 159). Beulah’s resistance embodies this precept. Even when she has the option to voice female narratives, she asks before proceeding: “‘I can tell you things done happened to women round here make the hair stand on your head. You want me to start? All you got to say is yes’” (*Lesson* 107). Sheriff Mapes responds to Beulah with a curt “‘No’” (*Lesson* 107). Beulah does not retort, as an alternative, she retreats back into the collective. However, the next time Beulah enters into the “space of utterance,” she contributes to the narrative but foregoes offering a female perspective. “‘Black people’” are the focus of Beulah’s diatribe, as she details past and present sufferings of the community (*Lesson* 108). Collective experiences prove more valuable than female narratives. In this moment, Beulah sacrifices a narrative trajectory that would
have, similar to Jameson, narrowed narrative focus in a way that affected communal narration.

Women, as manifestations of community, are not offered the personalized narrative space given to men. Even Jane, generally presumed the protagonist of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, is sometimes deemed secondary. Gaines himself wavers when speaking of her character. “Sometimes,” the author states, “I think that book is about men, not Miss Jane” (*CEG* 269). It is not a stretch to think in such terms. The novel is split into four sections, each heavily focused on narratives of male characters. However, unlike male characters, all of whom die, Jane continues onward.

Rootedness

Movement, though, does not necessarily equate to progress. If the oppositional space is to remain effective, rootedness must become an integral aspect of communal identity. Keith E. Byerman’s “A Slow-to-Anger” People: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as Historical Fiction” offers an interpretation similar to that of Thomières and Babb. Byerman explains that “The folk believe that they have survived by adaptation to their environment—in other words, by accepting necessity” (118). In Byerman’s essay, Jane is the leader of the “folk” and as stated, a model of this particular mindset. More importantly, in Jane’s narrative, such apathy is characterized as a trope of femininity. Men are often seen in progress—whether ideologically or literally changing locations. However, Jane learns from her travels with Ned that “People don’t keep moving” (*Autobiography* 78). She understands that being an African American in the South means that she must endure racism and economic disparity, but this certainty does not prevent her from feeling rooted to the southern place: “She returns ‘home’ because, […] true
liberation and the progress it engenders are not an abstract, such as the notion of ‘freedom,’ or a spatial entity, such as ‘the North,’ but rather a spiritual entity deeply rooted in a person’s character, dignity, and knowledge of his or her history and place” (Babb 85). For example, Ned’s life is threatened—for the first time—when he engages in committee work reporting mistreatment of blacks. Jane and Ned encounter the dilemma of whether or not to separate. If Ned remains in the South, he will not stop his work; Jane decides it would be best if he moved away. Ned does not want to go without Jane but she refuses to leave. In response to her refusal, Ned tells her, “‘You ain’t married to this place’” (Autobiography 78). Ned has not yet developed attachment to the place. Jane, on the other hand, responds that she is married to the place “‘[i]n a way’” (Autobiography 78). Jane’s “vow” to the community is not based on some sort of impending change. Rather, she is committed to the place that is familiar, or more specifically, Jane is committed to the place she views as her home.

Home is often a tenuous idea in Gaines’ fiction. Starting from The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and its portrayal of Reconstruction to A Gathering of Old Men and its illustration of the South post-Civil Rights Movement, the region undergoes significant social and economic regressions that present its African American residents with the decision to leave the South or remain. Youth are most enticed by opportunities elsewhere, but this ideology is problematic. Folks observes that “The modern South is morally corrupt, because its pursuit of success has displaced the shared human values of communal life” (“New South” 41). It is up to women to emphasize these values. This begins with reiterating the significance of rootedness, and as a result, establishing connections to place as home.
In the case of Aunt Lou and Miss Emma, the women’s large presence serves as an evocation rootedness and permanence. Doyle highlights the metaphorical aspect of their bodies, stating “The two women are depicted in [...] metaphors of great stones, boulders, and huge old stumps of oak and cypress” (*Voices* 211). These descriptions are offered by Grant, who oftentimes finds himself feeling pressed by the women and their demands. When they ask Grant to teach Jefferson, he describes gazing incredulously at them as they sat “like boulders, their bodies, their minds immovable” (*Lesson* 14). Their immobility is what prevails against Grant. A sense of obligation will not allow Grant to refuse his aunt, so if he is freed of any responsibility, it will be because Aunt Lou changes her mind. Grant understands that such a change is unlikely. In this instance, immobility connotes obstinacy, but their stubborn minds and bodies presumably root Grant. Aunt Lou and Miss Emma, as boulders, “are [...] the oldest or deepest-rooted parts of the land” (Doyle *Voices* 211). These stone-like women surround Grant and he is unable to overlook values learned as a member of the community.

Likewise, Jane’s mentorship with Jimmy Aaron mirrors Aunt Lou and Miss Emma’s struggle with Grant. Jimmy Aaron is considered “the one,” and just as Grant had been supported and guided by the community, Jimmy Aaron received the same care (*Autobiography* 214-220). However, unlike Grant, Jimmy wanted to be a leader, but his type of leadership proves too progressive. Also, in contrast to Grant, Jimmy knows the value of home and the roots he has in the communal place, yet Jimmy does not possess Grant’s acute understanding of the community. In the rural South, socioeconomic advancement was not swift or sweeping. The community that had sustained due to its propensity for suffering comes to accept inequality as a way of life: “Freedom here is
able to make a good living and have white folks say you good” (Autobiography 250). Jimmy cannot reconcile the idea that the place he is so rooted to is also so ideologically behind the times. Thus, the need for communal advancement becomes less about the community’s needs and more about Jimmy’s personal goals for the community. This causes an ideological separation, making Jimmy feel estranged from the collective. He does not yet realize that working as a leader requires that he both understand and remain patient with his followers. Yet Jane tries to instruct Jimmy on matters of the community.

In her old age—at this moment in the text she is over a century old—Jane becomes a communal matriarch. It is revealed that Jane was chosen as the church mother, a role requiring her to nurture the congregation in spiritual matters (Autobiography 238). In her leadership role, Jane both instructs Jimmy and brings about his return to the group. Gaudet notices a theme in Gaines’ text where “the boy or young man achieving direction is almost always connected to his mother’s or aunts strength and teaching” (150). Jane gently admonishes Jimmy against alienating members of the community. She understands that he needs the community and they also need Jimmy. “People and time bring forth leaders,” Jane tells Jimmy, “Leaders do not bring forth people” (Autobiography 241). The group cannot be pushed before they are ready, but Jimmy is intent upon receiving the community’s support. However, upon his return to request that they become involved in the Civil Rights Movement, the community rejects him. Clergymen were “against even letting [Jimmy] come in the church”; when Jimmy spoke people left the building. Finally, “the ones who stayed didn’t show much interest or respect” (Autobiography 249). Jane is disappointed at Jimmy’s reception, but she acknowledges that the community is not ready for Jimmy’s message. Jimmy has a
modern view of life in the South that cannot yet be perceived by members of the community. Jane—as an elder and longstanding member of the community—has a more complete understanding of the community’s needs: “Her view takes into account the accreditations of social and psychological inertia that have to be overcome. Both white oppression and black accommodation must be counteracted, and, in Jane’s view, the latter is nearly as formidable as the former” (Byerman 119). Jane’s and Jimmy’s differing viewpoints evince different comprehensions of rootedness and different expectations of home.

Home proves a poignant ideological divide due to differences between feminine and masculine spaces. As highlighted, the feminine domain is “an essentially private domestic space, constructed at least partly as a reflection of the assumption that heterosexuality prevails, that men interact with the public domain through their work while women focus their attentions on maintaining the home” (Norton 302). This concept accurately represents gender dynamics illustrated in Gaines’ works. Elderly women desire male leadership, so they nurture their young men for the public sphere. bell hooks’ “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” suggests that this relation to the home is particular to black women for whom “sexism delegates […] task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct […] spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination” (42). Despite the women’s efforts, the young men’s tenure in the public space broadens their perspectives in ways that make it difficult to incorporate back into rural communal life. On the other hand, the elderly, unlearned women never leave the community or develop understandings of “the human condition […] beyond the world
“[they] know” (Gaudet 141). The women maintain a very traditional connection to the “homeplace” as both domicile and as an evocation of community. Though the young men have a tenuous relation to homeplace, women continually seek to repair any disconnects that may thwart male resistance and leadership.

Homeplace is of particular importance to the development of African American men. Martin asserts that “Black homes have a dynamic function in the formation of Black men and boys’ gendered racial consciousness” (252). Home is the space where youth first encounter resistance and learn values of rootedness. hooks presents a similar portrayal of homeplace: “Despite the brutal reality of social apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist” (42). Miss Emma illustrates this special feature of homeplace during her visits with Jefferson. Her actions counter identity formation meant to occur within the spatial restrictions of prison, as convicts are expected to assume identities of prisoners. However, Miss Emma, believing in Jefferson’s humanity, reconfigures the prison to emulate the homeplace:

[…] Miss Emma took out the food and placed it on the table. She set places for four, two on either side of the table. […] My aunt would later say that Miss Emma went about setting the table the same way she would have done at home, humming her ’Termination song to herself. […] My aunt said that Miss Emma, still humming to herself, passed her hand over the table to make sure there was no dust, no specks there—just as she would do at home (Lesson 136).

The hybrid space becomes an iteration of Jefferson’s humanity. Though chained, he enters into a space designed to counter the less than humane treatment he has received.
Essentially, Miss Emma is hoping that homeplace reminds Jefferson of his value as an individual and member of the community.

Though Miss Emma solicits Grant to teach Jefferson how to be a man, she, too, provides an example dignity and resistance. She does not let the reality of imprisonment prevent her from seeking dignity for Jefferson. The jury may not have seen anything worthwhile in Jefferson, but Miss Emma does not accept this assessment; she resists hegemonic ideology defining her godson’s life as invaluable. hooks adds that “Black women resisted by making homes where all people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us” (42). Minutiae of setting a table and taking the time to make sure Jefferson’s surroundings are orderly relays that Jefferson both matters and is loved. Furthermore, Miss Emma’s reiteration of home imparts that Jefferson should seek dignity in every circumstance, and this is evident in the dignity he exhibited during his execution.  

And sometimes, the search for dignity involves separating the rootedness of homeplace for the sake community. For Jane this means risking her home to carry on Jimmy’s legacy. Although Jimmy could not successfully motivate the community to join his protest, he forges ahead and is killed. The community that did not support him finally rallies but Robert Samson, the owner of the land where the blacks live, tells them to “Go back home” (Autobiography 258). Robert Samson represents the white male patriarchal system that had propagated and supported racism and violence in the South. His dictate that they “go back home” reminds the community of the homeplaces they have created, but at this point, homeplace represents socioeconomic foundations stagnating the

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26 See Gathering, 234-235.
community and precipitating Jimmy’s death. While Jimmy’s murder makes homeplace a space of uncertainty, communal values become dearer. Thus, Jane responds to Robert Samson making it known that Jimmy’s death is not a conclusion: “Just a little piece of him is dead. […] The rest of him is waiting for us” (Autobiography 259). Whereas Jimmy could not motivate the community while alive, Jane picks up where he left off and continues his legacy of progress.

The women in Gathering have a role similar to Jane; specifically, Glo and the presence of her grandchildren hint at a continuation of a legacy of resistance. The text states that Glo attended the gathering with “her three little grandchildren next to her side” (Gathering 51). Her grandchildren represent the future of the community and it is important that they bear witness to this moment of communal resistance. As a nurturer of community and kinship, Glo ensures that this act remains a part of the communal narrative. These children, and the hope they represent, prove to be the essence of Gaines’ resistance, which is as much about men standing as it is about “someone else [picking] up where they left off and [continuing] the effort to escape from darkness to light” (CEG 31). Thus, the female emphasis on preserving community creates an opportunity to move from the darkness of inequality towards a future lit by willingness to stand for prosperity.
CONCLUSION

There is not an endpoint to Gaines’ notions of opposition; once communal identity is established, resistance evolves along with the collective. As seen in the texts, men shift from individual towards communal identities; whereas, women, especially older women, remain tied to the community and seek to advance the collective while upholding its values. There is no clear conclusion to the male quest for hetero-normative masculinity. Likewise, women continually uphold communal values calling for male leaders. Yet restrictions of hegemonic patriarchy necessitates the creation of an “evolutionary space” (Beavers 101) wherein females reiterate communal ties that finally take resistance out of the predominantly male sphere, into a space where resistance is pertinent to formation of a communal identity. Beavers recognizes the evolutionary space as one that will not “transform Louisianans as much as it will put their lives on a different course” (190). This allows Gaines to construct the future ambiguously. Beavers observes that such ambiguity “intimates that [Gaines] eschews the impulse to construct Louisiana as a polemical space where its problems are easily solved or where black and white represent good and evil, respectively” (101). That the future is uncertain calls for consideration of what Gaines hints at in regard to maintaining collective identity.

Gaines, himself, offers a solution to this potential dilemma. The author relates that he is constantly asked to pinpoint the demographic he hopes to reach with his writing. Gaines notes the difficulty of answering such a question and proceeds to tell the

27 In Gaudet’s analysis of female characters in Gaines’ “A Long Day in November,” the author highlights Amy’s insistence that her husband beat her as punishment for publically humiliating him. Gaudet states that the young woman is beholden to outdated “code in a community that is clearly more matriarchal than patriarchal” (153). This is an accurate representation of female characters explored in the previous section. Though they are the sometimes the most influential members of the community, women still rely on patriarchal leadership: “Although strong father figures are absent from Gaines’ fiction, patriarchy as an ideal continues” (Gaudet 153).
interviewer that if he “had” to chose, he would say that he writes for “Black youth, especially of the South” (author’s emphasis; Doyle and Gaines 61). The youth serve as important components of crafting lasting communal identities. As evident in the conclusions of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,28 *A Lesson Before Dying*,29 and *A Gathering of Old men*,30 children and adolescents are always made privy to the most poignant moments of communal suffering and resistance.

The youth must bear witness to moments of courage and heartbreak, allowing for a re-centering of worlds. Raphaël Lambert’s “Race and the Tragic Mode in Ernest J. Gaines’ *A Gathering of Old Men*” offers an explanation of varied worlds accompanying black existence in the South. What youth must witness, involves a realigning of worlds that designates between the white world that is “artificial, unnatural, and fabricated: […] the world of segregation” (Lambert 113) and the black world—their real, tangible world—that evokes rootedness in place where ideology dispensed by the dominant, illusory world deems them unworthy of occupying a meaningful space in either realm. In essence, the youth must come to view the black world, the realm encompassing their daily lives, as providing the most genuine and real sense of value and identity. Thus, when Johnny Paul begins to differentiate between what he and the other African Americans “don’t see” versus what Sheriff Mapes does see, he is validating a black world that existed before Cajuns interrupted the legacy of their connection to the land:

‘Y’all remember how it used to be? Johnny Paul said. […] ‘Remember?’ he said.

‘When they wasn’t no weeds—remember? Remember how they used to sit out

28 See *Autobiography*, 259.
29 See *Lesson*, 246-247.
30 See *Gathering*, 198.
there on the garry—Mama, Papa, Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Unc Moon, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Thread. Remember? Everybody had flowers in the yard. But nobody had four o’clocks like Jack Toussaint. Every day at four o’clock, they open up just as pretty. Remember?’ He stopped, thinking back. The rest of us all thinking back (90).

This is a scene that predates the children in attendance, but they must be introduced to the past that influences this moment of resistance and reestablishes a collective identity.

Children do not contribute to the communal narration. Yet the text reminds us that they are in attendance, seated at Glo’s side (Gathering 91). If children are to continue legacies of resistance and community, women must be present to ensure that this occurs. Gaudet notes the import of women as shaping future communal leaders: “achieving direction is almost always connected to [a] mother’s or aunt’s teaching” (Gaudet 150). Without the female presence, there is no space for identities of resistance to be directed or redirected. This proves essential if lasting communal identities are to be developed and maintained.
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