Agrégation Externe d’Anglais 2005/2006

Claudine Raynaud, Université François-Rabelais de Tours, Directrice de l’Équipe « Études Afro-Américaines », avec l’aide de Valérie Croisille-Milhat, Maître de conférences à l’Université de Picardie

A. Ernest Gaines
I. Romans, nouvelles et essais
"My Grandpa and the Haint". New Mexico Quarterly 36, 1966. 149-160.  
"Bloodline in Ink". Georgia Review 50.3 (Fall 1996): 523-32.

II. Ouvrages sur Ernest Gaines
III. Articles sur Ernest Gaines


*Callaloo* "Ernest J. Gaines: A Special Issue". 1.3 (1978).


_______________. "Ernest Gaines’ Materials: Place, People, Author". *MELUS* 15 : 3, Fall 1988. 75-93.


Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur – Concours 2006


Thomas, H. Nigel. "The Bad Nigger Figure in Selected Works of Richard Wright, William Melvin Kelley, and Ernest Gaines". *College Language Association Journal* 39.2 (Dec 1995): 143-64


IV. Adaptations filmiques d’ouvrages de Gaines


B. Contexte théorique et critique pour une étude de Miss Jane

I. Récits d’esclaves, autobiographies, sources historiques


**II. Romans noirs américains, « neo-slave narratives », romans historiques**


**III. Histoire et culture noire américaine (folklore, oralité)**


**IV. Lettres noires américaines**

*a) Autobiographie*


b) Littérature


V. Appareil théorique : quelques éléments

a) Autobiographie, diction, fiction


**b) Mémoire, histoire, savoirs discrédités**


**c) Dialogisme, roman et société**

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**VI. Ouvrages de référence**


**Information** :

La Bibliothèque d’Anglais de l’Université de Tours a accueilli le **Fonds Michel Fabre** sur la littérature et la culture afro-américaine : 3500 ouvrages. www./univ-tours.fr

Un colloque sera organisé les 4 et 5 novembre à l’Université de Tours avec les chercheurs américains, spécialistes de Gaines, et les chercheurs français en études afro-américaines sur *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

Alice Walker introduced me to the work of Ernest Gaines in 1971. At that time I was teaching at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi, where Alice also lived. Alice had sent Gaines her manuscript of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and he in turn shared his galleys of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* with her. Alice spoke enthusiastically about both Gaines's literary talents and his generosity in helping younger writers like herself.

The following year I began teaching American and Afro-American Studies at Yale University where I used Gaines's newly published *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as a text in my class on "American Literature and the Oral Tradition." To my delight Gaines accepted my invitation to visit Yale, and during a master's tea in Calhoun College he read passages from his new novel and spoke about his craft as a writer. His soft, gentle voice brought his characters to life with special power.

Several years later I visited Gaines at his apartment in San Francisco. It was a memorable experience as he showed me beautiful black and white photographs he had taken of scenes from his birthplace in New Roads, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. Great oak trees, country roads, and the homes of family and friends familiar to him from childhood hung lovingly framed in his front hall.

During the interview we sat together in his study where a small photo of William Faulkner hung above his desk. He recalled his childhood in Louisiana and the beloved aunt who had raised him. We also spoke of Southern storytellers and how their voices have shaped his fiction.

Since our interview we visited again during a reading Gaines gave at the University of Mississippi and during a symposium at the Sorbonne on "Afro-Americans in Europe." With each visit I am struck by the gentle voice of this large man who has shaped such beautiful portraits of the black and white characters in his fiction. Both as a writer and as a teacher he has immeasurably enriched our lives, and this interview offers a sense of the vision that inspires his fiction.

"I heard the voices... of my Louisiana people"
A Conversation with Ernest Gaines

**Leaving the South:** I left the South when I was quite young because I could not get the kind of education my people wanted me to get. But I can still write about it because I left something there, you see. I left a place I could love. I left people there that I loved.

When a lot of black writers and white writers leave the South, they want to totally wipe it out of their minds. They don't want to remember it. Or if they remember it, they remember it as a place that was not a happy place in their lives. When Richard Wright left this country and got involved in something else, the writing that he did about this place just did not come through as truly as when he was here. So, I can write about it still because I left something there. Living in San Francisco is not like living behind an iron curtain. I go back all the time. And there are many Louisianas here in San Francisco. When I was writing *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, my grandmother was alive and here in San Francisco. She was always cooking Louisiana food all the time, gumbo all the time, jambalaya all the time, shrimp creole all the time.

I have a very strong imagination. I can sit at my desk, see roads, bayous, towns, and houses, and hear voices and dialogues. But I do go back.

**The Camera and the Mind's Eye:** I always take a camera when I go back to Louisiana. I take both black and white and color photographs.

Most of these pictures were taken ten or twelve years ago. I’ve been trying to get some good shots of railroad tracks lately. I’ve shot several railroad tracks in my part of Louisiana around Baton Rouge, but I haven’t gotten the perfect track yet. I’ve gotten some good roads and lines of houses, and rivers and bayous, but I haven’t gotten the tracks that I want. Sometimes I might look at the photographs when I
write, but I seldom ever do because I think that my mind’s eye sees the area just as well as that photograph does and maybe even better, because the photograph is limited. The mind’s eye can travel down the road like a movie camera.

I keep the photographs because most of these places are gone now. The stores are gone, the houses are gone. This river is all built up and this man is dead. They are just things of past, and I don’t think that anything like that will ever be there again, ever again. This man can’t come back and you'll never see these places ever again. Never again, and surely not there.

Writing about the Unexpressed: I left Louisiana physically when I was fifteen, but I left my aunt there, who raised me until I was fifteen, and I left brothers, sisters, and friends. When I first started writing, I wanted to write really about them, much more than anything else. I just wanted to write about how we lived, because I didn’t see it in any books that I had read.

When I started writing *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, I had written several other books. I had written *Catherine Carmier*, *Of Love and Dust*, and *Bloodline*, which were all about that particular area in Louisiana. My first novel, *Catherine Carmier*, takes place in the early 1960s. I found that after finishing that book, I had not gotten everything in the book that I really wanted to get. So, I went back, I tried to write *Of Love and Dust*, and that went a little further back to the 1940s. Then I wrote the Bloodline stories, and they took place between the 1930s and the 1960s. I found that the more I wrote the further back I was getting. I was getting back into what I thought of as experiences that blacks, that my people, my own immediate family could have experienced.

The Saga of Miss Jane: Some people have asked me whether or not *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is fiction or nonfiction. It is fiction. When Dial Press first sent it out, they did not put “a novel” on the galleys or on the dustjacket, so a lot of people had the feeling that it could have been real. I think people were also thrown off by the introduction that I put into the book, where a young professor from a high school or a college in Baton Rouge goes to this plantation to interview this old lady with a tape recorder. This was put here for a couple of reasons. I wanted to prepare you for Miss Jane’s language, and I tried to show you that the story could not be told without help. I don’t think a 110-year-old lady could tell her story of four hundred pages without some help, so I had other people help her out. The introduction is fiction just as the novel is.

I think a lot of people read the introduction and stopped. They thought this was a book about Ernie Gaines taking a tape recorder down and finding an old lady. He threw away all the stuff he did not want and then called the rest a novel.

I never conducted any formal interviews.

I created all of this. I did a lot of research in books to give some facts to what Miss Jane could talk about, but these are my creations. I read quite a few interviews performed with former slaves by the WPA during the thirties and I got their rhythm and how they said certain things. But I never interviewed anybody. Since *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* came out, I’ve gotten all these requests asking me to interview old people. I’ve said, “Listen I don’t know anything about interviewing old people!” I wrote a book

There are certain things that you can capture both in terms of language and situations that historical texts could never really render in terms of what actually happened. That’s where the imagination plays its role. I read a lot of slave narratives, a lot of biographies, and a lot of history by both blacks and whites, by both Southerners and Northerners. Then I listened to rural blues and listened to sermons by ministers. I read so much and digested it all. Then I listened to the old people. I spent a lot of time in Louisiana and I kept talking and kept asking questions. Then I said, “Okay, I’ve gotten all this thing in me now. Imagination must take over.”

My intention at that time was to put all of this accumulated knowledge of black experiences into the mind of a Louisiana, illiterate, ex-slave. I had to put all I read into the mind of an illiterate, who had basic common sense but who did not have the advantage of books.
History as a Backdrop: I did not go to history books for truth. I went to history books for some facts that I wanted to have, but not truth because history and truth are different. With Miss Jane, I worked to find and think of events that she might remember from the past, locally, statewide, and nationally. I discussed with other people what they might remember. I did a lot of reading, a lot of research, and talked to a lot of people. I didn't have any political thought in mind in terms of using a historical novel as a vehicle to rewrite American history. If I walk out on the street in Harlem, I'm sure I'm going to see a black lady who's uneducated and I'm going to wonder, "What is her story?" That's what I had in mind when I started out. As a matter of fact, I wanted to write different sketches about things that she could go through. It was not about her life, but sketches of things that happened to her. When I was doing that, I was listening to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The way Mussorgsky uses music as sketches for those paintings was like what I was trying to do with the sketches of Miss Jane's life.

This novel is made up of four books. It begins around 1864 and it goes to 1962. I cut it off just before Kennedy's death.

Everything is created except the fact that there has been slavery in America and that there was a war. Booker T. Washington said there were three things that the slaves wanted to do after they heard of their freedom: One, leave the plantation, even though they might have to come back to it; Two, change their names; Three, learn to read and write. The first part of this book was based on those first two things out of slavery: movement and names.

I know through reading the slave narratives that freed slaves sang, applauded and said, "We're free."

One character, Albert Cluveau, is based on a man who actually exists. In 1903, a Cajun assassin killed a black professor on the river. That was a story that the people told all my life. When I was back in Louisiana recently, on the same place where I grew up on the same river, I visited the Palange mansion. I met Madame Palange, an old lady of about eighty-something, and she read the book. She remembered these terrible Cajun assassinations and she told me that she knew exactly whom I'd based it on. This man, who would kill for whomever was paying him, was quite friendly toward people. He'd sit around and talk about his killings. Since I heard that he did these things, that's the way I put him in the book.

During the time I was writing, I heard the voices of not only all these ex-slave narratives I had read, but also what I knew of the voices of my Louisiana people. I think that after I got really moving, Miss Jane's voice just followed through. I hate to say things like "I hear the voices," because then people think I'm nuts. But certainly when I sat down at the desk, the voice took over again, and I started where I left off from the day before. It was almost the easiest book to write.

Whose Story Was It, Anyway?: When I first thought about writing the book, I tried to tell it from a different point of view altogether. I tried from the multiple point of views. It wasn't *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, but a shortened biography of Miss Jane Pittman. I was trying to recall what people do in the Southern part of the country. They come together and talk at certain events such as funerals or baptisms or weddings or wakes or birth of a child. They come together and they do a lot of talking. You might have a dozen or more people sitting around talking. This was the approach that I used in the beginning. Miss Jane was already dead, and I wanted her story told through a group conversation. They would start off by talking about her, and then, of course, if a group of people start off talking about a certain subject, the conversation will spread out and go all directions. They start out talking about her, and they might include themselves, history, philosophy, jokes, and tales. And that's what happened.

For about a year I used this multiple point of view, but I was not getting what I wanted. I put it aside and started over from her point of view. I already had a lot of voices coming from all directions. So I suppose her voice was not very hard to concentrate on. I had been concentrating on different voices before then, so I just got her.

People say to me "Oh Miss Jane sounds so real." Well I found something that I could deal with: Grab this oral voice and put it in on paper. I lucked up and was able to do it. Had I not done a lot of reading I probably would never have been able to do it. That's what I found in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, or Joyce's *Dubliners* or *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*. They showed me how to use the material, the oral tradition that I had grown up in. It had become very difficult for me to mold that stuff and put it on paper.
**The Art of Storytelling:** I never thought about the difference between an oral style of talking and conversation and a written one when I’m writing. I tried to write what I hear. That’s all I try to do. I never think about the difference between a written word and an oral word when I’m writing. I never think like that. I just write as truly as I possibly can and try to write as simply as I can to communicate with anyone who would read my book.

I wish I could get up on stage and tell a story, but I’m really not a storyteller in the oral tradition. I go to bars, tell jokes, and people say, “Get outta here go home write your novels.” I cannot tell a story. None of my friends will listen to my stories. They walk out of the room. I’m much more westernized and much more “bookinized” than I would want to give credit to. I come from a tradition of storytellers, but I’m not good at it. My brothers and my mother can tell fantastic stories.

I think the relationship between storytelling and writing is definitely an American thing. I think all of our greatest books have been in the first person, starting with *Moby-Dick*. Then Twain stories and then Faulkner stories. I think Hemingway once said that anyone could tell a story from the first person point of view. I don’t know if that’s true, but we as Americans do tell it better from that point of view. The books that I have read by American writers that seemed truer and had have had more influence on me have been those told in that genre. I’m thinking about a book like *Catcher in the Rye*, a fantastic book in the first person point of view. I admire good writing from the omniscient point of view. Good Lord, I read something of Joseph Conrad and say “Goddamn!” But I don’t know American writers who can write like that, and yet when you come to that first person point of view, man, I don’t know who can beat us.

**Writers Black and White:** When I was in Africa, the African writers there were very much concerned with how to find a voice not only in Afro-American writing, but in African writing, especially in Nigeria, where they told me that sometimes you could pick up a piece of writing and unless you knew the writer’s name, you probably did not know whether he was white or black. They asked me if I have that identity problem here. If I had just picked up a piece of writing, how could I identify that piece of work as being by a black writer or a white writer? I told them that if I knew the writer, if I had read enough by him, I would know. If I picked up a Hemingway book, I would know it was Hemingway. If I picked up a book of Baldwin, I would know it was Baldwin’s. But I also tried to explain to them that I did not know if I could completely separate my association with white writers because I had been, so much influenced them. The first writers I read were maybe Steinbeck, du Maupassant, Turgenev, and Faulkner. I probably started with Faulkner.

Even the novel itself, the form of the novel, is a creation of white writers. So, if we're writing a novel, then we are already working in a form that was established by white writers. Then of course, we're using the English language, which is a white, European language. But I was trying to show them that we could bring other things into that language. I come from the rural South, so I’m very much influenced by things like jazz and folk music and blues and spirituals and the oral tradition of telling stories, because I listened to a lot of them as a child. I bring these things into my own work. If there's any kind of distinction to my work, these are the kind of things that give it its distinct flavor.

But I was also telling them that a lot of black writers I know don’t use these kinds of methods because a lot of them didn’t come from my kind of background. You find a lot of northern black writers coming out of the black, city ghettos, [Amiri] Baraka for example. He might use jazz language, but he would not use the rural themes, the locales or the Southern type of language that I might use. So even among Afro-American writers, we have a very different approach to tell the story within the novel itself. We use the form, since we can't get away from the form unless we create something else, but we do bring our own things to it.

**Searching for the Edges:** In most of my work, I go to extremes in a lot of things. I might get a very subservient type of black man and then in the next moment, I might get one completely opposite to him. I might get a cowardly type, and the next one would do anything in the world, take any kind of risk. In a story I might use complete darkness, then I use complete light. I might get complete cold, I might get complete heat. These things are as much a character in the story as anything else is. Nature does play a very important role in just about everything. In books like *Of Love and Dust* and *In My Father's House*, nature is as much a character as any other characters. If it's cold, there's a reason for it's being cold, and cold has as much an effect on that person's character, on the movement of the story and the story itself as any thing else does. Or the heat. Usually when there's heat, there is violence, especially in Southern literature, Faulkner’s "Dry September," for example.
I never think of those kinds of things when I'm working on a story. Students come up now and ask me, "Did you know you put those symbols in there?" You never think of symbols. I do know that nature had its place in the stories. In *Of Love and Dust*, it's always hot weather, it's always hot as hell. And then it's pitch black at night -- the clashing, the difference between black and light. Whereas *In My Father's House*, when the father is looking for the son, there's all this coldness, the gray sky and dreariness and mud and dingy bars and that sort of thing. You need that kind of atmosphere -- hell, you can't have blue sky.

The Road to "My Father's House": Lots of people have thought I was using a different approach in my last book, *In My Father's House*.

I had tried to write this book years before. As a matter of fact, it was supposed to be my second novel, but I just couldn't get it done. I tried writing it soon after I finished *Catherine Carmier*. I don't know that I was being different in any way. I never ever want to write two books alike, two characters alike if I can help it. Philip Martin was just another character for me, and of course, he is a product of the time in which the book came out. If I had tried to write the book fifteen years earlier, he could not have been a civil rights leader. But he was the same sort of character; that is, the father-son conflicts were still there.

The book is built around two moments in life. One moment is when the father cannot answer the door when the family is leaving, and the second is the moment when the sister is raped and the oldest son kills the man who raped his sister. Those themes could take place any time. They are the sort of themes that *Absalom, Absalom!* is about. As a matter of fact, when I was trying to write the book years and years ago, I talked to some people at Louisiana State University about it. They said, "If Faulkner did it, you can do it too." It took me seven years. I brought in the civil rights demonstrations and things later because the story would take place later -- in the late sixties. It does not really represent a change in my attitude about man, or my pessimism or skepticism or my humanism or fatalism or anything else.

I try to write as truly as I possibly can about the period. For example, if I write a book in the 1980s, I try to bring in things that might be occurring in the eighties that would mold the personality of the character. If I had written the book twenty years earlier, there would be something else that would have molded the personality of the character. I try to make the character work with the times.

I never as a writer compared Philip Martin to Martin Luther King -- only the other characters did. I just wrote him as a man who tried to follow the philosophy of King. He has his own personality; things that have happened to him which he must deal with as well.

The Rules of the Racial Game: In a lot of my books, I deal with the situation where black kids and white kids are growing up together and then suddenly one day someone tells them, "You can't play together anymore because you're black and you're white." They find it the most ridiculous thing in the world, but they must go by the rules. He must go his way and the other one must go his way. But, because of the rules of the game, if they stick close by, they will have conflicts. This is what happens with Philip Martin and the white sheriff in *In My Father's House*. I did the same thing in *Of Love and Dust*. Bobo recognizes the situation, and it makes him uneasy. He says, "You know, they're playing with me, they're playing with you. We're just here and the big man is just playing with us both. We recognize it, but that's the rules. I must fight you and kill you, or you kill me," the Christian and the lion in the arena.

I think if people, white and black, are going to live as close together as my characters live around each other every day, there's going to be some kind of reaction. I think that despite all the rules and all the laws that say there's not supposed to be any mixing, there will be. If people are going to see each other, live around each other every day, eat the same kind of food, drink the same kind of water, use the same kind of language, wear the same kind of clothes, there's going to be some kind of mixture.

When I am writing a book, I never think about who the characters are going to be and how they will react to one another. If I have white characters, I try to make them as real as I possibly can, and if there are black characters I just try to make them as true as I possibly can. I never think about their liking or loving or disliking or loving or hating one another. We all have much more in common than we have differences. I would say that about people all over the world. They don't know how much in common that they have.