A Lesson Before Dying as Style Guide

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 Literary prizes and mentors reveal the diverse ways that white expectations challenge an ethics of swagger. Where the former exemplifies impersonal intrusion, the latter features intimate coercions. Thus, white authority conditions black writing both publicly and privately. If the Black Archivists confronted this conditioning through prize-granting and mentorship, then conflicts about style also affected their works. These conflicts were significant because they centered on creative innovation. Although Walker’s experiments with the epistolary novel and Johnson’s manipulation of the seafaring tale touched upon these issues, Ernest Gaines’s revisions of classic literary strategies engaged them more directly. His style seemingly reflected an embrace of white aesthetics, yet in crucial ways his techniques and themes troubled the assumptions behind mainstream approaches. As his career progressed, the pitch of that troubling heightened.

 Citing Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, critics often ally Gaines with white influences. They are largely following his lead. In addition to the white modernists above, Gaines also mentions his artistic debts to Greek tragedians such as Sophocles and Russian masters—namely Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. His writing, based on such statements, could be read as a product of white stylists and black topics. Gaines, a native of Louisiana, appreciates cultural hybridity. He recognizes the complex hierarchies created by creoles, whites, blacks, and
even the gradations produced by skin tones. While such sensitivity offers a cosmopolitan outlook, he still notes racism as an organizing principle in southern society. This consciousness of racial reality produces a tension in his oeuvre, and especially in his later books, Gaines presents knotty musings about white influences and black style. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, these musings emerge luminously.

Examining *Lesson’s* accounts of black male interaction, this chapter argues that Gaines’s depictions should be understood as both social commentary and stylistic referendum. His novel’s wrongful conviction plot refines the modernist trope of grace and at the same moment engages black men’s dehumanizing encounters with the American justice system. By blending these purposes, Gaines not only indicts New Criticism’s inveighing against politicized fiction but also dramatizes the tension between form and experience in the representation of black life. His conclusions regarding that tension are evident in how he uses the observer-hero narrative, a mainstay of white canonical texts, to probe the relationship between his two central characters, black males who are separated by class and temperament. Through these strategies, Gaines enters late twentieth-century debates about literary sophistication that are dominated by white judgments. His entrance raises questions about merit, race, and democracy.

### Setting Style

Ernest Gaines sets his 1993 masterpiece *A Lesson Before Dying* in 1940s Louisiana, and the novel’s attention to, among other things, separate but equal schools, humiliating retail experiences, and fatal encounters with law enforcement mark it as a meditation on a segregated southern world.1 Given *Lesson’s* preoccupation with marquee themes of African American protest literature,2 one could be excused for calling it a vintage text.

1. John Lowe suggests that Ernest Gaines “had originally intended to set” *A Lesson Before Dying* “in 1988” (306). This abandoned plan has many interesting implications, but I want to emphasize Gaines’s deliberate choice of a pre-integration environment. For more on this issue, see Gaines’s essay, “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*” (2005).

2. Protest literature centrally engages Anglo-America’s inhumanity to its domestic black population. Claudia Tate says this about the protest tradition: “We . . . generally expect” black writers “to contest racist perspectives and the resulting oppression. Consequently, we require these texts and especially those of canonical status to foreground the injustice of black protagonists’ persistent and contested encounters with the material and the psychological effects of a racially exploitative distribution of social goods, services, and power. We might call this the manifest text of black literary discourse” (*Psychoanalysis* 3–4). For more on protest literature, see Noel Schrauf-
Although its mise-en-scène and pastoral lyricism seem incongruous in the often experimental and sometimes arcane world of the Black Archivists, Gaines’s book engages matters of black art and white influence that directly recall *Beloved*, *The Color Purple*, and *Middle Passage*. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Charles Johnson inspect aesthetic conundrums using transnational phenomena such as slavery and missionary activity, but Gaines focuses on the Jim Crow South. In the 1990s, with the success of a film such as *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), this focus might have marked him as somewhat hip. Gaines’s South, though, eschews trendy racial mutuality. Charting the rifts that Dixie caused and the spiritual renovation that it could host, his accounts of alienated African American males revise white modernism’s technique fetish and infuses its conception of grace with black southern tints.

*Lesson* focuses on Grant Wiggins, a thirty-something schoolteacher, and Jefferson, a twenty-one-year-old field hand. These two were initially united for the latter’s formal education, and they are reunited when he is sentenced to die for a murder that he did not commit. Reflecting how the American justice system dehumanizes black men, *Lesson*’s portrait of wrongful conviction evokes novels such as Mentis Carrerre’s *Man in the Cane* (1956), Nathaniel Hook’s *Town on Trial* (1959), and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Despite sharing earlier texts’ interest in black male experiences of trials and incarceration, Gaines’s novel revises their emphases. *Lesson* rejects the interracial plot that casts the white lawyer as the savior of the black accused. By replacing the lawyer–client pairing with a teacher–convict one, the book curtails white control of dignity. In the place of mainstream liberalism, it offers the difficult proposition of black male empathy. *Lesson*’s chief negotiations appear to be male-

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4. This plot emerges in several black civil rights novels, including Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Mentis Carrerre’s *Man in the Cane* (1956), Nathaniel Hook’s *Town on Trial* (1959), and William Bosworth’s *The Long Journey* (1956). It resurfaces in feature films such as *A Time to Kill* (1996), *Amistad* (1997), *Hurricane* (1999), and the television show *Raising the Bar* (2008).

5. Concerned about this scenario’s verisimilitude, Gaines “wrote a letter to the warden at Angola, the state prison . . . in Louisiana” trying to determine whether “it would be possible for someone not kin to the condemned man who was not a minister of religion or his legal advisor to visit him on death row” (*Mozart* 52). When that appeal received no answer, he queried an ex-sheriff who informed him that decisions like that “would be entirely up to the discretion” of local law enforcement officials (*Mozart* 55).
dominated; nevertheless, Gaines’s inclusion of guardians such as Tante Lou and Miss Emma and Grant’s love interest, Vivian Baptiste, implies that black women influentially admonish black men as they strive to fulfill their potential. Responding to signature novels within the twentieth-century literary canon, these representations suggest that segregated Louisiana—replete with sharecroppers, one-room schoolhouses, and a tenacious racial hierarchy—holds keys to Reagan era black masculinity. The first step in acquiring such keys is appreciating the life rhythms of a “very old place.”

Nearly all critics of Gaines’s work have remarked upon his abiding interest in rural Louisiana. Though it is tempting to group him with other master evokers of Dixie, Mary Ellen Doyle warns that his “parish is not the same in terrain, history, or culture as other parts of the South of modern literature . . . nor is his fictional re-creation of it truly comparable in content, style, or tone” (4, 5). Much of this distinction arises from the extremely personal contours of Gaines’s landscape. Explaining why, when he was living on the West Coast, he had to “come back to the South again,” he confessed, “I can write in San Francisco, but I could not stay [there] and write without coming to Baton Rouge. I must go back to the plantation where I was born and raised. I have to touch, I have to be, you melt into things and you let them melt into you . . . the trees, the rivers, the bayous, the language, the sounds” (Knight 69). This sentiment was offered in 1974, and more than twenty-five years later, he reaffirmed it: “[My] body had gone to California to be educated, but [my] soul was still there in Louisiana . . . It was only that place that I really wanted to write about, from the beginning and even to this day” (“Ernest”).

Gaines’s affinity for the Louisiana countryside reflects his passionate desire to document the part of his home folks’ “history” that “has not been told” (Tarshis 74). Recalling that when he went to California in late 1940s, he “read and read, but . . . did not see [him]self and [his] friends and family and relatives in the stuff” he was reading, Gaines betrayed a goad for his career that anticipated black women writers

6. In addition to revising his Black Archivists peers, in particular Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage, Gaines also takes on depictions of the rural South like those offered in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children (1938) and The Long Dream (1959), and William Melvin Kelley’s A Different Drummer (1962).

7. Borrowed from Albert Murray’s 1971 memoir, the phrase—“South to a very old place”—evokes Dixie’s hidden cultural and spiritual repositories. Even as this phrase honors spaces of nurturing, it also carries a hint of exhaustion. This tension between regeneration and fatigue aptly marks Gaines’s portrayals of his home region.
such as Morrison, Gayl Jones, Walker, and Gloria Naylor (Fitzgerald and Marchant 8). Like these authors, he turned to his pen because he did not see his life reflected in literature. Thus, every time he recorded southern existence, he paid tribute to ancestors who were silenced. Though commemoration undoubtedly fueled Gaines’s creativity, his explorations of blackness via Louisiana plantation culture bespoke futurity in addition to nostalgia. Just as Morrison’s Reagan era accounts of slavery registered as a musing on 1980s cultural realities, Gaines’s portrayal of segregation created distinct ripples in the 1990s. The writer felt that though his novel “would have been a totally different book had” it been set “in 88 instead of 48,” he still saw it “speaking to 88 . . . trying to demonstrate to readers how” the situations of the 1980s and 1990s “came about” (Lowe 309). One of the most interesting late twentieth-century situations involved the rural/urban divide in black life.

The 1990s world in which Lesson was published confronted problems related to policing, education, and gender strife that were devastating in black communities. While explanations for these phenomena evoked “postmodern urbanity,” Gaines saw these city-centered analyses as inadequate (Dubey, Signs 15). The simultaneous growth of the black middle class and of the black poor and imprisoned was a fulfillment of many 1970s prophecies of division; nonetheless, for black men, the roots of this polarization predated both the civil rights movement and the Great Migration. Gaines suggested that notwithstanding urban relocations, late twentieth-century black masculinity entailed a literal or a metaphorical journey South. Put differently, solving the riddle of black male wholeness hinged on a return to the spaces where inequality was spawned. Once the black man arrived, his most poignant withdrawal would be a grace filled with the complex obligations of love.

The segregated South sought to free the black man “from addressing the question of personal responsibility” (Byerman 48). This describes Jefferson when his defense attorney misguidedly compares him to a hog, but in equally pernicious ways, Grant also gets tempted to abdicate his duties. Matthew Antoine, his former teacher, outlined the temptation. When an exuberant Grant visited Antoine after his first semester in college, instead of receiving support, he heard this opinion about his parish and his fate: “You have to go away to know about life. There’s no

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8. The specter of alienation has haunted black male success narratives at least since Frederick Douglass recorded his experiences learning to read. In The Future of the Race (1996), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West suggest that “mounting intraracial disparities” insure that such polarization will not soon diminish (36).
life here. There’s nothing but ignorance here. You want to know about life? Well, it’s too late. Forget it. Just go on and be the nigger you were born to be, but forget about life” (65). The former pupil wanted answers to questions outside of his academic curriculum, and his wonderment prompted Antoine’s scorn. Suggesting that black southern deliverance is at best a naïve and at worst a sadistic pursuit, he told Grant that since “God has looked after” the black folks of the Parish “these past three hundred years without your help,” the best thing for the young teacher to do would be to run (64). Antoine’s advice pits him against Grant’s aunt.

Tante Lou powerfully endorses the redemptive potential of staying in your community.9 Her concept of redemption however requires humility and a respect for the quiet transactions that undergird freedom. When she put Grant on a path toward higher learning, Tante Lou separated him out from the dire fate of his classmates insisting that he would “not be one of the others” (63). To insure this distinction, she, according to her minister, “cheat[ed] herself” but kept such sacrifices from her nephew (218). These revelations add texture to Grant’s predicament. In a much quoted passage from Lesson, Grant confessed, “We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone.” Because that historically had been the case, he believed that Tante Lou and her friend, Miss Emma “each time a male child is born . . . hope” that “he will be the one to change this vicious circle.” With Grant and Jefferson, the two women moved from an abstract contemplation of having “a black man stand for” them to a concrete exploration of that possibility. To Grant, that exploration is a sort of “holding on” that he believes will “break him” (167). He learns that just as his aunt had cheated herself for him, he now confronts the submission that life demanded. Although Tante Lou’s imposition on Grant could be explained by blood, Lesson situates Miss Emma differently.

Jefferson’s godmother is a large woman. Giving detail to that immensity, Gaines writes, “She is of average height, five four, five five, but weighs nearly two hundred pounds” (3). Miss Emma, paired as she is with Tante Lou, often seems static. When Grant muses on her behavior at the trial, he says, “Once she and my aunt found their places . . . [she] became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps” (3).

9. Gaines says of Tante Lou that she exists to “exert pressure” on Grant, to “keep him in the South.” This pressure transmutes Grant’s ennui becoming a “benefit” for him (Mozart 58).
That description anticipates her deep association with the folk culture of the Quarters. While that culture once was a dynamic living tree, it is reduced now to the listlessness of a stump or an impedimentary rock. Critics emphasize this dimension of Gaines’s portrayal, yet they overlook a crucial irony in this description. Stones and stumps are associated with obstacles and stunted or arrested growth; nonetheless, both also carry more productive connotations.

Rocks form foundations; they provide the basis for the erection of new structures. Likewise, stumps are sometimes symbols of support. Although the life within them may be waning, they can bolster those who are yet toiling. In this iteration, Miss Emma embodies a different sort of spur for Grant. Where Antoine’s view that the Quarters is a bankrupt space infected Grant’s outlook on life, Miss Emma—by involving him in Jefferson’s arrest, trial, and sentencing—suggests that the Quarters’ poetics of survival might not be outmoded. Keith Byerman hints at this fact when he observes, “As he has done in earlier works, Gaines [in Lesson] suggests that [the conservative mores and religious beliefs of the plantation’s] folk culture is reaching a historical dead end” (48). Despite this development, Byerman still argues that Miss Emma and the plantation bequeath Grant “the black folk emphasis on endurance” (50). That bequeathal proves crucial because his present crisis requires humility, and his community knows “how to survive [humiliation] without bitterness” (Byerman 49). Miss Emma is not Grant’s only tutor in that endeavor.

Vivian Baptiste, Grant’s girlfriend, is physically different from Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Where the latter women are old, large, dark, and immobile, Vivian—as implied by the biases of her Free LaCove relatives, her French phrases on the chalkboard, and her open field coupling with Grant—embodies a light-skinned, educated, youthful sensuality that he thinks is “perfect” (92). On one level, this juxtaposition of black femininity could be seen as an evocation of transgenerational estrangement and the poisonous history of black skin color politics that haunts New Orleans. Although Gaines encourages contemplation of these two

10. Gaines’s imagery as he describes Miss Emma reflects his intimate connection to the Louisiana landscape. Explaining why he regularly returned to the parish where he grew up, he stated: “I must come back to be with the land in different seasons, to travel the land” (Rowell 86). The depth of that commitment emerges in his 2010 residence, a “six-acre lot that had been part of the plantation” where he was raised (Seelye).

11. While most critics view the folk culture in Lesson as moribund, Jeffrey Folks writes that in this novel, “Gaines adopts a more affirming attitude toward the entire range of Southern traditional rural culture, and he finds in this culture . . . a useful and enduring cultural tradition that can be set against the fragmentation inherent in the long Diaspora” (260).

themes, his characterization of Vivian more broadly allies her with Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Just as the older women inexorably pushed Grant toward the painful dignity of meeting with Jefferson, Vivian—possessing a richness of experience that complements Grant’s wide-ranging exposure to the world—challenged his nihilism via the promise of love. That promise, however, props him right back to Tante Lou and Miss Emma’s admonitions.

When Grant wanted to escape the burden of visiting Jefferson, Vivian acknowledged the load, yet she, like the elder women, insisted that self-indulgence could not be accepted. Grant got into a liquor-fueled fight with some mulattos, and when he explained why allowing the men to insult Jefferson was impossible, Vivian bluntly stated, “That’s how you all get yourselves killed” (206). Discussing the fallout from such death, Vivian declared that it is black women who “get hurt no matter what happens” (208). Avoiding violent confrontation means submitting to affront. Thus, even in the midst of strip searches and back-door importuning, Grant must consider the effect of his actions on Vivian and the other women in his life. These experiences underscore the inevitable shame that the southern black man must experience before he can even consider dignity. In one sense, this debilitating initiation could be soul robbing. Grant and Jefferson’s relationship suggests that these indignities are rather the seeds of transcendence. Understanding why requires a consideration of how these plot elements relate to Gaines’s critique of mainstream modernism.

Grant’s appetite for violence recalls the men of action that fill Hemingway’s rough-hewn natural landscapes. In contemplating fist-cuffs as a route to honor, he not only projects himself more deeply into

The authors of that study identify Alice Walker as “one of several contemporary Black authors” who “are addressing concerns about color in their works” (164). If Walker’s fiction probes these issues, then perhaps Gaines’s attention in Lesson could be viewed not only as an extension of his presentations of the social mélange that defines Louisiana society but also as another refinement of Walker’s outlook on rural experience.

13. If Miss Emma is anchored to the parish almost as a feature of the land, then Grant’s roots in the region depend on Vivian. Gaines explains, “Vivian is there to keep Grant there . . . without her he probably wouldn’t have stayed long enough to really deal with Jefferson” (Lowe 302).

14. Though linking Lesson to Native Son is popular, the novel more clearly engages Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children and The Long Dream. These texts not only deal with the southern setting that figures so prominently in Lesson but also look at heterosexual romance and the obligations of the middle-class black male. Vivian’s sensuality rebuts the destructive black female desire that Wright offers via Sarah in “Long Black Song,” a short story included in Uncle Tom’s Children. In addition, the claustrophobic morality of The Long Dream is re-envisioned in Tante Lou and Miss Emma. These readings of the women in Wright invariably juxtapose Grant with Silas, Tyree, and Rex “Fishbelly” Tucker respectively, a juxtaposition that grounds him in ways that Jefferson helps him to apprehend.
a white modernist lineage but also banishes his regional intuitions. As Richard Wright showed in “Long Black Song,” a short story from his collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), violent retaliation has a short, volatile half-life for black men in the South. Grant understands these varieties, but like Rutherford Calhoun, his appetite for symbolic militancy distracts him from more difficult gestures of caring. In his strategies for recalling Grant to such care, Gaines offers his first sustained revision of white modernism, especially as exemplified by Hemingway. Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian, a trio of black women, compel Grant toward genuine concern. Their prominence critiques the flattening of womanhood in white male modernism. By creating a multigenerational black feminine chorus, Gaines complicates the tendency to sexualize male-female interaction and suggests the enduring efficacy of black womanhood’s directives. These directives are implicated in Gaines’s second major revision of white modernism, the juxtaposition of the teacher and the criminal.

**Segregated Grace**

The schoolteacher–convict pairing at the center of *Lesson* not only reveals black pride and shame but also considers black masculinity within the Anglo-American male imagination. Carlyle Thompson insightfully explores this idea when he analyzes the significance of the central characters’ names. He argues that if Gaines “by naming the young black protagonist ‘Jefferson’ . . . symbolizes the . . . black male image in the white mind” of American nation-builders such as Thomas Jefferson, then the novelist’s connection of Grant to the “liberatory significance of [Union Army general] Ulysses S. Grant” signals an alternate, yet linked evocation of the relationship between black manhood and white perception (285–86). This juxtaposition of two white American patriarchs seems to reinforce a view of black masculinity that depends on white male supervision and rescue. Although Sheriff Guidry and plantation owner Henri Pichot affirm the buffeting force of white maleness in *Lesson*, Gaines’s text hinges on an intraracial anxiety. Grant and Jefferson are thus correctives. While they evoke segregation’s duress and Reagan era black male

15. Jeffrey Leak makes a similar point about Jefferson and Grant (64–65). Interestingly, Gaines suggests that the names were not pondered extensively; rather, he just chooses the names of presidents (Lowe 301). For more on Jefferson’s and Grant’s names, see Katherine Daley and Carolyn M. Jones “Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*: Freedom in Confined Spaces” (93).
striving, they also, on the level of theme and narration, signal Gaines’s critique of white taste. This critique stems from his novel’s portrayals of intellectualism, criminality, and black redeemers.

Using the biblical parable of the prodigal son, Herman Beavers argues that the relationship between Grant and Jefferson is best understood as one of incongruity. Linking Grant to the good son and Jefferson to the prodigal, Beavers concludes, “Lesson cannot be read as a novel of reconciliation”; rather, he feels that the text stresses “the difficulty that arises out of incompatibility” (138). Beavers believes that Jefferson’s imprisonment is a “negative moment” that “anticipates another moment of grace, rebirth, and conversion,” the instant when Grant as the good son can understand the “spiritual pilgrimage” of Jefferson, his wayward sibling (145, 136). Beavers’s reading, correcting earlier ones that tended to favor either Grant or Jefferson disproportionately, smartly notes the simultaneity of the roles that each character plays. Although he accounts for the centrality of Grant and Jefferson, Beavers’s convictions about Jefferson’s waywardness and Grant’s grace oversimplify the novel’s ideological collision.

Jefferson, the convict, and Grant, the teacher, epitomize alternate modes of black masculinity. Given the differences in their educations, fates, and outlook, it is tempting to view them as polar opposites; nonetheless, Gaines emphasizes their linkages. On one level, their interconnection stems from plot mandates. Commandeered by his aunt and Jefferson’s godmother, Grant has no choice but to try and erase the memory of the lawyer who, during Jefferson’s trial for murder, unsuccessfully attempted to save his client’s life by labeling him a hog. The teacher must strive to produce the transformation that Tante Lou and Miss Emma desire, namely sending “a man . . . to [the electric] chair,” or else he will face shaming from these female elders (13). Notwithstanding the persuasiveness of such cajoling, coercion alone does not define the duo’s bond. Both men view the social forces arrayed against them as insurmountable. For Jefferson, his defense attorney’s porcine description

16. Questions regarding class have long dogged the civil rights movement. On one level, E. Franklin Frazier’s Black Bourgeoisie (1957) and Harold Cruse’s The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (1967) impugned integration as a launching point for the black upper class that did little to remedy the suffering of the underclass. Such anxieties returned in the 1980s and the 1990s. From hip hop’s fixation on authenticity to narratives of black privileged disenchantment, songs such as EPMD’s “Crossover” (1992), Lords of the Underground’s “Keep It Underground” (1993), and Outkast’s “Mainstream” (1996); movies such as Jungle Fever (1991) and Drop Squad (1994); and literature such as George C. Wolfe’s The Colored Museum (1988) and Brent Wade’s Company Man (1992) made it clear that racial betrayal—whether via social distancing, interracial dating, or Shelby Steele-style disparagement—was a fertile sphere of exploration.
combines with criminal conviction to wound his dignity. Such wounding threatens his will, reducing him to self-pitying withdrawals from human contact. Though Grant is not literally incarcerated, his cynicism stunts his soul. He stays in the quarters, but his commitment is tenuous. Gaines makes these distinct yet linked dispositions reflections of white prejudice, yet each man also implicates the black community in his dilemma.

When Grant asks Jefferson whether he can die in a way that “please[s]” Miss Emma, whether he can bear the “cross” for him and his plantation neighbors, the younger man states, “Y’all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins . . . Yes, I’m youman . . . But didn’t nobody know that ’fore now. Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that’s how it was s’pose to be. You too, Mr. Wiggins. You never thought I was nothing else. I didn’t neither” (222, 224). This speech carries a trace of incredulity, but it is not delivered with bitterness. Jefferson here merely articulates the assumptions that surrounded his life, assumptions that perhaps justify the discussion of Bayonne plantation as a “dead end” (Byerman 45), an “economically depressed . . . community” (Leak 63), and a space that renders its inhabitants “politically inert” (Beavers 137). Grant detects these acute limitations even as he evokes Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson to countermand them. While these circumscribing characterizations are accurate, Jefferson’s growing awareness of his heroic potential not only reflects Grant’s motivational efforts—“You have a chance of being bigger than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation” (193)—but also the ways in which Lesson’s folk society possesses an “energizing cultural coherence” (Folks 260). This coherence absorbs “African American religion, respect for elders, loyalty to family and neighbors, and common sense morality” (Folks 260). Thus, in a moment shortly before he is executed, Jefferson, like his ancestors, recognizes that the quotidian particulars of black life are an agonizing yet gratifying tutelage. That the convict’s grasp of this truth eclipses the teacher’s reveals Gaines’s inventive manipulation of the observer-hero narrative.

Parsing several books, among them Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902), Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, F Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), and Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962), Lawrence Buell contends that novelists who are seeking ways to deal with ideological incongruities related to identity often do so via the observer-hero narrative. Defining the genre, Buell writes that it is “a story told by a dramatized first-person narrator about a significant relationship or encounter he has had with another person. The two figures are both opposites and counterparts, the second person perceived both as contrasting with the
first in outlook or life-style and as embodying in purer or more extreme form qualities which the observer has or sympathizes with in moderation” (93). Buell concentrates exclusively on white American and European texts, but his observations’ relevance to *Lesson* is telling.

Gaines’s preoccupation with the observer-hero narrative emerges in “the inseparability of [his] two main characters”; however, he moves outside of an abstract juxtaposition of “divergent psychic universes” and makes Jefferson and Grant’s relationship a metaphor for his commentary on black masculinity (Buell 94, 104). Like Morrison when she grapples with New Criticism, Gaines’s use of the observer-hero narrative shows both a thorough awareness of American and European master tropes and an abiding insistence that black experience retains distinctness. Thematically, this surfaces in *Lesson*’s reconfiguration of classical narratives of crime such as Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In those texts, the intellectual’s energy is directed toward detection and imprisonment. That is his proper work. Extending traditions evident in a work such as John Edgar Wideman’s *Reuben* (1987), Gaines depicts an intellectual bent on redemption. The novelist’s depictions of southern grace’s impact on Grant and Jefferson’s interactions extend and complete his critique.

Gaines, paralleling Ralph Ellison’s sentiments in “A Very Stern Discipline” (1967), has long identified Ernest Hemingway’s notion “grace under pressure” as a model for his depictions of black life (Rowell 91). In *Lesson*, he adds an interesting inflection to his explorations of this theme. The minister in *Lesson* plays a more flattering role than in any other book by Gaines. In fact, a few observers believe that Rev. Ambrose is one of, if not the most respectable preacher in the novelist’s oeuvre.

17. Gaines’s concern with narrative emerges throughout his career. In a 1976 interview, he discusses his approaches to writing points of view: “When I start a book in the first person point of view my characters take over very soon and then carry the story themselves. From the omniscient point of view, it is harder for me (for the characters to take over), because it seems that I’m always interrupting them” (Rowell 88). Regarding *Lesson* specifically, see Lowe (299–301) and Gaines’s essay “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying.*”

18. About Hemingway, Gaines observed, “[His] writings of . . . grace under pressure, his writing about the white characters, made me see my own black people. For example, who has more pressure on him than Jackie Robinson when he was playing baseball . . . or Joe Louis? No man has had more pressure on him than Martin Luther King” (Rowell 91). While Hemingway throws pressurized reality into graphic relief, Gaines notes that the white writer’s “black characters” were “very seldom . . . given any kind of sympathetic roles” (Rowell 91). This discrepancy perhaps merely emphasizes the difference between good technique and progressive content, but in *Lesson* the relationship between skill and theme facilitates a musing on cultural particularity and aesthetic fusion.

Although a positive portrait of the clergy could serve many ends, the author here uses a venerable man of the cloth to explore southern grace. Christianity gives the name grace to the divine sufficiency unleashed in the wake of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. Thus, in Protestant theology, grace is tied to unmerited and replete favor. If Dixie’s religious heritage makes this perspective on grace resonant, then another rich connotation also circulates. Southern hospitality includes not just rote kindness but also sincere generosity. Distinctions like these demarcate well-mannered gentility and the emotional commitment to another’s comfort. Grace then, at its most profound, is not mere cheeriness; rather, it is an acceptance of the unrequested and often unwelcome obligations that impinge upon individual freedom. In *Lesson*, Gaines posits a multivalent southern grace as the catalyst to Jefferson and Grant’s successful confrontations with human messiness.\(^\text{20}\) By doing so, he customizes redemption and sends reverberations along both white canonical wires and the lines of urban-centered narratives of black misery. Grant is the key to deciphering such vibrations.

When Tante Lou forces Grant to endure entering Henri Pichot’s back door and being searched at the jail, her nephew accuses her of “helping them white people to humiliate” him. He explains, “Everything you sent me to school for, you’re stripping me of it” (79). Grant’s remark reflects plausible indignation. To him, grace and humility do not mark resourcefulness; rather, they are the defense mechanisms of a community so overwhelmed by “bewilderment and disenfranchisement” that it “does not possess the means to sustain resistance in the face of white hostility” (Beavers 139). Thus, the concession that Jefferson’s guilt or innocence is pointless becomes for Grant a stinging rebuke of black impotence. When he is talking to Tante Lou and Miss Emma about their request that he make Jefferson a “man,” Grant registers his pain with defiant sarcasm: “Jefferson is dead . . . He’s dead now. And I can’t raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep others from ending up like this” (13, 14). The teacher’s statements seem impersonal, but his confession to Vivian proves that his assessment is more profound: “I need to go someplace where I can feel I’m living . . . I don’t feel alive here” (29).

on negative portrayals of ministers in Gaines’s work. About the Reverend Ambrose, Gaines says, “I had [him] start out as the old stereotypical black minister . . . just doing odd jobs . . . But at the end he seems stronger than Grant, in a way” (Lowe 324).

\(^{20}\) Katherine Daley and Carolyn M. Jones argue that *Lesson* “is a story of faith that uses Christian symbols and myths as vehicles for communicating a set of social values” (84). Where they see an antirational “love” impelling Grant and Jefferson to “undergo willingly” what they would “have been forced to undergo in the past,” I argue that the love that leads both men to graceful action is tied to careful calculation (113).
Grant’s anger, defined by a fusion of naiveté, entitlement, and pride, evokes the idealistic calls for cultural ascendancy voiced by the Black Arts Movement. His judgments reveal a clear anxiety regarding submission; thus, he itches to resolve the collision between helplessness and agency by raging against the machine. Though Grant’s fury finds vent in Lesson, its efficacy dissipates quickly. Just as BAM’s internalization of the European tendency to valorize culture could not translate neatly into American blackness, Grant’s swashbuckling aspirations, part Nietzschean übermensch and part silver screen phantasm, collapse. This collapse powers Gaines’s meditations on style. If earlier Grant’s impulses were toward violence in the service of honor, then with Jefferson, he seeks at least metaphorically an all or nothing prison break. Incremental change strikes him as quiet concession, a sentiment next door to enabling acquiescence. Grant’s techniques of freedom are the counterpart to flourish with no substance, and Gaines sees black novels in the late twentieth century as afflicted with soulless virtuosity. If such performances hold no hope for reviving black communities, Gaines suggests that there might be a more viable resource.

Gaines turns Grant, the black intellectual, into a vehicle for his ruminations on “adequate witness” and “proper . . . testimony” (Beavers 141). At the same moment that Grant facilitates this foray into the breach between religious and juridical possibilities for blackness, he also symbolizes the aesthetic options that can solidify the twentieth-century novel. Grant cannot glibly import external prescriptions into the dense peculiarities of his community’s existence, and likewise Gaines contends that his narrative’s incorporation of cues from Anglo-American and European masters of the idiom must be sublimated to culturally specific experiences. Thus, from his early admiration of Russian writers such as Turgenev to his abiding affinity for technicians such as Joyce, Gaines always balanced white models with black sensibilities. Grant’s life seems utterly divorced from such necessities. After all, he lives in a rigidly segregated world. Still, like many characters in novels by the Black Archivists, his capacity to testify stalls because of a foreclosed vision. Grant’s interactions with Jefferson’s writings become Lesson’s corrective lens.

21. Grant’s rage evokes the rebellious spirit that Gaines encountered at San Francisco State in the 1960s. The novelist recalls, “I was . . . attacked by many of the black militants for having spent my time working on [The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman] when I should have been out there fighting cops . . . I said, ‘listen . . . I’ll go back home and I’m going to write the best paragraph that I can write that day; I’ll make it so good that it’ll be read long after Bull Connor . . . and the cops” are “dead” and “gone” (Lowe 317). This commitment to a testimony that lasts beyond suffering becomes Grant and Jefferson’s biggest accomplishment.
Incarcerated Heroes

Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian all offered Grant enlivened imagination as the antidote to apathy, but Jefferson’s diary with its misspellings, improper grammar, and tangled syntax becomes the touch-point for Grant’s true emergence into alternate options. Though the diary could be seen as an appropriation of Faulkner’s approach in the opening pages of *As I Lay Dying* (1930), it also bears traces of Celie’s odyssey in *The Color Purple*. This triangle intimates Gaines’s investment in a fusion aesthetic that will bolster black writing, and Grant’s reaction to the diary bears out this optimism. The schoolteacher brings Jefferson a notebook with the suggestion that maybe the prisoner “could write down [his] thoughts” (185). Cast then as a performance of literacy and as a documentation of consciousness, the diary could be seen as Grant’s assignment in humanity for Jefferson. Gaines acknowledges this possibility, yet he also suggests that the diary is a part of Jefferson beyond Grant’s access. He observes, “I had to get into Jefferson. No matter how much Grant would ask him questions, he was evasive . . . I needed something to get into Jefferson’s mind . . . The diary was there for the reader to see who he was” (Lowe 300). This mechanism for probing Jefferson’s essence becomes a metaphor of authoritative witness. In his diary, Jefferson hazards a mode of expression that unapologetically communicates his identity. Through this depiction, Gaines exposes Grant to the purest possibilities of self-knowledge, and by extension, he isolates black narrative’s swagger.

Jefferson’s diary forms an interesting adjunct to his execution. While Rev. Ambrose’s strength emerged because he attended the latter, Grant’s graciousness centers on what he does with the former. Paul Bonin, the kindly white deputy, arrives at the end of *Lesson*, to tell Grant that Jefferson was “the strongest man in that crowded room” (253). Aside from offering this perception, Paul has also been tasked to deliver Jefferson’s diary. He shares with the schoolteacher, “I didn’t think it was my place to open the notebook. He asked me to bring it to you, and I brought it to you. But I would like to know his thoughts sometime—if you don’t mind” (255). Ed Piacentino stresses that Paul’s curiosity signals “the possibility for eventual change and racial harmony in the segregationist South” (83). While such “racial reconciliation” may lurk in the novel’s offering, *Lesson’s* chief priority at its conclusion—à la *Beloved*—is the shedding of crippling criteria regarding exemplarity (Piacentino 73). 22

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22. In an earlier draft, Gaines planned to have Paul tell Grant’s class how Jefferson died courageously. His agent objected, “You can’t have this white guy come through there now” (Lowe 305).
Grant detects segregated society’s belief that “upward mobility alone is the signifier of heroic action,” and despite his resistance, he himself starts with the idea that “the heroic ideal is . . . middle-class, financially comfortable” (Beavers 145). When he interacts with Jefferson, Grant must move beyond sociopolitical propaganda and venture into the unruliness of black survival. The schoolteacher by the end of Lesson is humbled, admitting that the jailbird Jefferson is “better” than him (193). By accepting such a valuation, Grant takes on a humiliating truth. His tear-filled clutching of Jefferson’s diary, the record of the young man’s “true self,” not only ends Lesson but also it frames Gaines’s commentary on narrative (Lowe 301).

Describing his anxiety about the stream-of-consciousness style and the dialect in Jefferson’s notebook, Gaines writes, “I was a bit concerned about the reader . . . I thought, ‘I can’t play the Molly Bloom thing and go to sixty pages.’ Joyce was writing an experimental novel, and people want to read him for that. But in my case they’re going to read . . . the story, as it is” (Lowe 301). Gaines’s comment conveys his status as a writer’s writer, one who always considers his craft’s practical demands. In addition, his remarks include a subtle reminder of the negotiations concealed in masterful expression. Early in his career, Gaines made it clear that while he counted white American and European writers as influences, no black authors, “not . . . Richard Wright or Ellison or Baldwin or anybody like that,” figured in his development (Fitzgerald and Marchant 13). He explained why: “In all the creative writing classes I took there were no stories by black writers . . . Invisible Man was out but nobody was assigning it . . . You were just beginning to read Baldwin’s essays, Notes of a Native Son . . . There was very little emphasis upon writing by black writers” (Tooker and Hofheins 110). By the time that he was writing Lesson, Gaines retained his conviction that Turgenev, Hemingway, Faulkner, Gogol, and Eudora Welty shaped his sensibility, yet his sparring with the dense lyricism of Morrison’s Beloved and the pun-laden pedantry of Johnson’s Middle Passage suggests his awareness of new voices in the debates about artistic fundamentals. Gaines’s determination then to write “cleanly, clearly, and truthfully . . . so that anyone might be able to pick it up and read it” speaks to the Black Archivists’ aspirations to spurn other folks’ “Molly Bloom thing[s]” and embrace a sublime born of ordinary individuals making their way as real people.

Thus, just as Robert Gottlieb lurks within Toni Morrison’s Beloved, a white interlocutor haunts Gaines’s Lesson.
With characteristic generosity, he shared his treasures with others.

Ralph Ellison acknowledged black folk culture as a vital influence in creative expression, yet he relied on white modernists such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce to organize his incorporations. Because of this, at crucial moments, he manifested an incomplete trust in his work's folk values. Lawrence Jackson, Lena M. Hill, Adam Bradley, and Barbara Foley have all commented upon the ways in which Ellison's editing of the Mary Rambo sections of the drafts of Invisible Man radically affected the novelist's putative agenda. While Gaines was perhaps unaware of these particular manuscripts, his questioning of Ellison's grasp of southern life surfaces prominently in Tante Lou and Miss Emma. These women oversee Grant's interactions with Jefferson from start to finish. Possessed of onerous demands, they nonetheless instruct him in the dignity of indig- nity. Tante Lou sacrifices to fund Grant's future; Miss Emma uncom- plainingly gives her labor until the debt of her generosity comes due. These examples propel Grant into an understanding of what Robert Hayden called "love's austere and lonely offices" (10). Gaines's portrayal thus sharply critiques Invisible Man's protagonist, who flees Mary Rambo and seeks solace in the Brotherhood.

If Invisible Man provided one target for Gaines, then Black Arts Movement texts such as Amiri Baraka's Dutchman (1964) and Charles Gordone's No Place to Be Somebody (1969) get addressed in Grant's fantasies of epic heroism. Certainly, Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson penetrated the vice-grip that segregation placed on black possibility, and in many ways, characters such as Dutchman's Clay Williams and No Place's Johnny Williams emblematized a black everyman that sought such neat triumph. Grant, the middle-class black male, revealed Gaines's belief that when confronted with cultural agony, ornamental protocols evaporate. These revisions of black feminine and black masculine portraits connect

23. Assessing Gaines's second novel Of Love and Dust (1967), John Edgar Wideman wrote, "Eschewing Faulknerian montage and metaphysical rhetoric is consistent with Gaines's description of his writing as characterized by the 'simplest terms'" ("Of Love" 82). Thus, Gaines even then was refining his attitude toward white modernist exemplars.

24. For discussions of the Mary scene in both draft and published forms, see Lawrence Jackson's Ralph Ellison, Michael Hill and Lena Hill's Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Reference Guide (2008), Adam Bradley's Ralph Ellison in Progress: From Invisible Man to Three Days Before the Shooting (2010), and Barbara Foley's Wrestling With the Left.

25. Gaines's most explicit statement regarding Ellison and southern culture occurs in a 1994 interview. Gaines observes: "I don't think that [Ellison] really knew the Southern land—the swamps, the bayous, the fields, picking cotton. I think because of that, he just overplayed his hand sometimes" (Lowe 312).
to a theory of artistic practice, a theory that subordinates white modernist conventions to a faith in black folk expression. Gaines thus calls the twentieth-century African American novelist back home.\textsuperscript{26} Ironically, the mainstream critical establishment remained mute to the call.

**Verdicts on Black Eloquence**

*Lesson’s* responses to white aesthetic expectations may indicate Gaines’s peeve with the chronic oversimplification of his art. Listening to yet another commentator call him a quaint yet grave chronicler of agrarian demise, he might have declared that enough is enough and started composing a novel that rebutted their pabulum. Such a response would be understandable, but Gaines’s disposition makes this gesture unlikely.\textsuperscript{27} As was the case when he lost the Pulitzer Prize to his mentor Wallace Stegner, he would probably greet ostensible snubbing with a dismissive wave of his hand. Gaines might deem it inappropriate to upbraid critics of his work; however, he by contrast felt compelled—as Ronald Reagan’s second presidential term ended—to take up his ongoing meditations about the rural/urban divide in African American experience. These meditations were fateful work, akin to the ruminations on cultural erasure that had initially led him to pick up a pen. As had been the case in the 1950s, his thoughts alerted him to an absence and prompted him toward filling it.

By the late 1980s, a curious combination of demographic shifts, marketing manipulation, and political debate conspired to make public black identity a predominantly urban phenomenon. This development profoundly affected African American music and fashion, and in literature, it prompted a crisis because “claims to racial representation could no longer be objectively grounded on organic models of community” (Dubey, *Signs* 5). While Gaines acknowledged how income disparities, incarceration, and gaps in education splintered black lives, he resisted assertions

\textsuperscript{26} On “Back Home,” a cut from Gill Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson’s *Winter in America* (1974), the Great Migration’s unfulfilled promises dishearten the song’s speaker. Still, if the metropolis’s streets leave him “lost and searching for one warm friendly smile,” then the remedy is a return to Dixie, where he has “got him some people” who “love” him (Scott-Heron and Jackson). Using these conventions, Heron and Jackson evoke what bell hooks calls a “beloved black community,” one that survives exodus and terror to preserve African American culture (*Yearning* 36).

\textsuperscript{27} Gaines’s staid outlook on prizes can be discerned from his 1994 remark about his MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant. He stated, “I knew people who had won the MacArthur, but I never thought I’d win . . . I assumed they [the awards] were political” (Laney 293).
that folk values, the source of black survival since slavery, had been over-whelmed by the postmodern city. Gaines’s resistance, brilliantly manifested in Lesson, seemed outmoded and naïve in sociopolitical terms, but by manifesting suspicions regarding classic and avant-garde strategies of literary representation, it presciently predicted the subtlety of white expectations.\(^{28}\) His eloquent warning had an ambivalent afterlife.

White expectations bedevil the Black Archivists’ pursuit of swagger in dynamic ways. At one moment, white authority assumes a New Critical guise and invalidates political content. Two decades later, white aesthetic fashion veers toward postmodernism, championing stream-of-consciousness narratives and suspicions about the author’s role. Gaines saw this as a shell game and, returning to the orienting verities of black southern life, advocated an aesthetic authorized by grace. The 24-person selection committee for the National Book Critics Circle Award rewarded his efforts and gave him its fiction award. On one level, his NBCCA could be seen as an instance of white affirmation. No black writer had won that prize since Toni Morrison in 1977, and as Jack Miles, former president of the National Book Critics Circle, explained, the NBCC’s extensive polling and its larger judging board mean that this award “represents the literary establishment far more closely than any other body in this country” (“Dictatorship”). While such prestige was not to be sneezed at, Gaines’s illustrations of how black art could effectively engage white aesthetic traditions were incompletely registered. His swagger was trumped by post-structuralism’s hankering after experimental aesthetics, a hankering gratified by some of his Black Archivists peers.\(^ {29}\)

Although Gaines’s retooling of modernism and the observer-hero narrative were ingenious, his techniques showed indirectness. This

\(^{28}\) Gaines’s responses to wrongful conviction and black middle-class impotence featured humility as potentially edifying. In a moment coursing with a “marvelous new militancy,” his prescriptions seemed anachronistic (Hansen 87). For evidence of both popular and bourgeois rebellion, see, respectively, Public Enemy’s classic album It Takes A Nation of Millions (1988) and the April 1990 Ebony cover story, “Success is the Best Revenge,” about Vanessa Williams, the former Miss America whose crown had been stripped. This article focused on Williams’s marriage, her booming record career, and her family life. This portrait of bourgeois bliss engaged a specific triumph over racial prejudice, but the story’s title phrase emerged as a generic slogan of affluence as activism. A vivid example of this temperament is a poster—from the early 1990s—that pictured a black man standing in front of a garage where a Lamborghini, a Porsche, a Ferrari, and a Mercedes-Benz are parked. Beneath, the caption reads, “Success is the Best Revenge.”

\(^{29}\) Gordon Hunter, in a lecture entitled “Prestige and the Case for Contemporary American Realism,” argued that in many ways, the late twentieth-century canon of American novels reflected seventy years of tyranny by avant-garde tastemakers. Because of this tyranny, Hutner believes that many literary critics have minimized the importance of accessible narratives. His assessment holds important insights regarding Lesson. Professor Hutner delivered his lecture on Thursday, September 17, 2009, at the University of Iowa.
indirectness may constitute a final aspect of white expectations’ impact on black swagger. Post–civil rights novelists mostly eschewed incendiary confrontations with white literary authority. When friends of Toni Morrison violated this rule to protest the 1988 National Book Award decision, they were roundly criticized. The factors driving that criticism were complex, but the problem that such criticism revealed was simple. In the late twentieth century, black novelists were uncertain regarding the appropriate form and tone for critiquing white values. Almost any contrarian utterance ran the risk of being dismissed as racial victimizing.

The first part of this study argues that the ethics of swagger forces black novelists to look at how white expectations influence their art. If such looking shows the delicate and difficult process of claiming autonomy, then it also reveals that journeys into the black archives were crucial to creative innovation. My treatments of Morrison’s engagement with Alice Childress and Gaines’s revisions of Ralph Ellison allude to these journeys. In “Black Traditions,” the second part of this book, I will explore how the Black Archivists’ profound knowledge of literary history burnished the ethics of swagger. I start by reconsidering a situation that Walker and Johnson illustrated, the work of one Black Archivist prompting a reply from another. Where Walker and Johnson produced a single exchange, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison’s rebuttals cover a much longer history.
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