

The Discourse of Interracial Reconciliation in Ernest J. Gaines's Fiction

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Abstract: This paper addresses the issue of reconciliation between blacks and whites through Gaines' literary work. The focal point of Gaines' fiction is the relationships between whites and blacks in rural Louisiana. Imprisoned in a dialectical struggle of race, blacks and whites, since the period of slavery, are fixed and permanently entangled in dominant and subordinate forms of social interactions. Conflicts, frustrations, crimes and trauma have been the pervasive results of the strained relations between the two races. How then does Gaines envision the bridge between the two racial communities? How do they come to terms with the crimes and historical injustice of slavery, racial prejudice and oppression? What are the forms of reconciliation in Gaines' work? I propose to examine through some of Gaines' novels, the discourse of reconciliation; that is the different suggested modes of the communities or individuals' breaking out of the prison of the past, or their coming to terms with their traumatic experiences, and their overcoming of the racial barriers.

Key words: race, conflict, stereotype, counter-stereotype, death, compromise, mediation.

Introduction

By custom and law, there has always been a cultural and social boundary between whites and blacks. Race and racial conflict have been dominant in the history of African American literary productions, and they are still pervasive today. Based on a context of racial prejudices, the relationships between whites and blacks in Gaines' fiction are deeply pregnant with blacks' dehumanization: a traumatic experience of brutality and humiliation, lynching, rape, subjugation and murder. Yet, in Gaines' vision, racial barriers are not intractable. His fiction navigates between apparently distant and opposed races, but actually these races have much in common and the writing perspective of the author is to find solutions to seemingly insoluble problems. Quite significantly, his fiction is a site of reconciliation of racial tensions.

His stories are narratives of process rather than resolution. In this perspective, his fiction, in general, produces a discourse of reconciliation which is always in process; that is a particular way of or mediating the conflicts between whites and blacks. This paper aims to explore the relationships across racial lines and investigate the ways in which racial conflicts are in a process of a resolution. Thus, our leading question is: how does Gaines' fiction invest in and stage reconciliation between whites and blacks? To what extent are the barriers between blacks and whites underplayed in Gaines' fiction?

Among other things, interracial reconciliation means trust, rejection of stereotypes, and respect for people of other races. This study therefore focuses on the rejection in Gaines' fiction of the reductive racial binaries that separate white oppressors from black victims, and stipulates white superiority and black inferiority. The blurring of the boundaries between blacks and whites pinpoints the starting point of the struggle for social justice, the shift from the stereotypical social categories and the construction of a new social order that privileges a mixed ethnic identity.

Of Love and Dust (1967), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1972), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), and *A Lesson before Dying* (1993), represent salient examples, and constitute the body of our argument in this study. The discourse of interracial reconciliation in Ernest Gaines' Fiction shall, therefore, take us to investigate his imaginative techniques for obliterating white supremacist position and engaging new social and political discourses of reconciliation. More specifically, going from such binaries as superior/inferior, human/non-human, whites and blacks, we shall bring forth the discourse of reconciliation promoted in Gaines' fiction by the reversal of stereotypes.

In this perspective, our inquiry draws primarily on critical discourse analysis approach in order to assess the way Gaines's fiction plays a role in changing the social relations between whites and blacks. In addition, deconstructive criticism also has a good deal to offer in this project. It is no doubt a reliable tool that will allow us to examine the obliterating process of the established oppositions and their outcome in the relations between both races. Two aspects of this obliterating process shall constitute the main articulation of this study: the resistance to the myth of white dominant rhetoric of supremacy and the bonds across the racial lines.

1) Countering White Dominant Rhetoric of Supremacy

How does one go about resisting the dominant rhetoric of supremacy and its forms of cultural imposition, thus making the individual and social transformation possible? Fanon's suggestion is this: White society—which is based on myths of progress, civilization, liberalism, education, enlightenment, refinement—will be transformed precisely by forces, skills, methods, and techniques that are organized to oppose “the expansion and triumph” of those western colonial ideologies that are tainted with supremacy. (Sandoval, 1997, p. 100).

The reconciliation between whites and blacks supposes a change in the deep rooted mores and practices that have confined the different parties into hierarchical and antagonistic stances: oppressors and oppressed, victimizers and victims, subjects and objects. The breakdown of these dichotomous relations for a new form of interaction and behavior constitutes a significant achievement of Gaines' works. What shall be considered in the present section of our investigation are the relationships on the cutting edge of change, which blur the boundary between whites and blacks. To a great extent, the overlapping lines between whites and blacks, which portend reconciliation, are made possible through Gaines' imaginative mediators of dynamic relations, namely the black heroes or the white power breakers.

What keeps blacks and whites apart is the white dominating social structure, or white hegemony that fosters degrading images upon blacks. As Silberman (1964) writes, “The American Negro has been subject to a system designed to destroy ambition, prevent independence, and erode intelligence for the past three and a half centuries” (p.77). Silberman (1964) further contends that “... the Negro cannot move into the main stream of American life unless he is able to destroy the image in his own mind and in the mind of the white” (p. 77). Thus, should whites and blacks reconcile, the myths of white supremacy and black inferiority need to be overthrown, obliterated. And Gaines argues during an interview in *Mozart and Leadbelly* (2005) that “Myths can be changed – but only *you* can change them” [emphasis

mine]. The responsibility for obliterating the myths is assumed by Gaines' "young men of vision", or the white power breakers, as he states in the following:

Black students are always asking me, 'Why do so many of your young men of vision die in your novels? You seem to kill off the braver ones. Are you trying to discourage us from trying?' I tell them that my young men die because they're not supposed to have vision. They're supposed to accept the status quo. They're supposed to accept that what is will always be, or wait till others change it for them, but not themselves. The young men in my novels and short stories who die cannot wait until others change the condition, because the condition then may not ever be changed. (pp. 49-50).

Countering white supremacist ideology, Gaines engages in a construction of new images of blacks. As Clark (2002) puts it, "Though there are undeniably intertextual connections between slave and protest discourses and Gaines' reconfigurations of black male subjectivity, his fictive modus operandi has been more counter-textual, for he radically dismantles the archetypal depictions of black men as tragic racial victims" (p. 69). Actually, while exposing race-related conflicts, Gaines tries, at the same time, to find a way to move beyond racial turmoil to suggest the possibilities of new interracial collaboration or interaction beyond oppressors and oppressed, or winners and losers: an intermediate area between whites and blacks. In other words, Gaines makes use of racial tensions to forge reconciliation.

In *Of Love and Dust*, the social rules of Marshall Plantation dictate a defined boundary that encloses both races in superior and inferior positions. Jim Kelly, the participant narrator and all the other blacks on the plantation are passive and submissive, which guarantees the racial and social harmony. But when Marcus Payne starts working as an indentured servant for the landowner, who freed him from prison, the relationships between whites and blacks give rise to racial tension because Marcus refuses to accommodate to the dehumanizing system imposed by Marshall Hebert and Sydney Bonbon, his Cajun overseer. Marcus is born and raised in a city. He not only ignores the mores of the plantation system, but he also resists the prevailing racial code that confers a superiority and inferiority status to respectively whites and blacks. As he said to Jim Kelly, the participant narrator of the story: "They don't nut this kid like they done nut all the rest of y'all round here" (Gaines, 1967, p. 30).

In the white southern and conservative society, Marcus is viewed as a "trouble maker," the representation of a counter stereotype. Marcus resolves to fight against a plantation system rooted in the tradition of slavery. In his struggle, he overthrows the code that regulates the relations between blacks and whites, and all the symbols pertaining to white superiority over blacks. In other words, Marcus refuses any self-debasing or self-inferiority attitude and takes action to subvert the pre-existing forms of white power.

Among other things, he refuses to wear the required khaki uniform for field workers; and he refuses to use respectful title: "Mr." when referring to Bonbon. What is more, he courts Pauline Guerin, Bonbon's black mistress, and when the latter rejects him, he then courts Louise, the overseer's wife and associates with Marshall to plot against Bonbon. These rebellious attitudes that transgress the code of black inferiority irritate Marshall's sense of superiority. In retaliation, Marshall, the white supremacist, plots to neutralize Marcus by pitting Bonbon against him. As a result, Bonbon kills Marcus when the latter was preparing to leave the south with Louise.

Although he is dead, Marcus' rebellious attitude and acts have prompted Jim Kelly, who was considered as "the whitemouth," according to Marcus (Gaines, 1967, p. 6), to re-evaluate his self-image and free himself of his servile attitude. Indeed, in the process of Marcus' rebellion that threatens the white system of control, a new consciousness is born in Jim Kelly. It is his realization of human weaknesses in Marshall Hebert's personality that creates this transitional possibility: his rejection of the white power structure. He has come to admire Marcus for his heroic stand toward death and the white power structure. Gaines thus erases in him his role of servility and signals a climactic moment of mutual respect, above all, a symbol of a future interracial reconciliation in *Of Love and Dust*.

Interracial reconciliation informs *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as well. The novel itself frames the relations between blacks and whites from slavery time through to the 1960s, the period of blacks' Civil Rights Movements. This fictionalization of the life of an African American woman puts to the fore the experience of blacks' struggle for survival and liberation from whites' domination and oppression. Miss Jane epitomizes the militant and combative African American and she is the dynamic force of other heroic characters in the novel: female as well as male.

Miss Jane's heroic growth starts with Big Laura, a female character who has decided to lead a group of young blacks in the North after the announcement of blacks' emancipation. Unfortunately, she has been slaughtered by white patrollers who were opposed to blacks' leaving the south. Big Laura has responded with deadly blows to some of her enemies before being killed in the presence of little Jane who was just eight years old then. The lives of little Jane, as well as Ned, Big Laura's baby boy were saved out of sheer luck. Hidden in the bush, they have not been seen by the white slave catchers. When he grew up, Ned Douglass, Jane's godson became an activist civil rights fighter for the black community. Later, he will be assassinated because of his fight for black freedom. Next, Jimmy Aaron, another young active militant took after him, and the same fate befell on him during a march he organized to protest against racial inequities. Miss Jane, who has now grown old, has learned and espoused a great deal of the liberational values. She can now reject the stereotype of black passivity and challenge the white authority by negating the order of the white plantation owner:

But look at me acting high and mighty. Don't the black curtain hang over my window; don't the veil cover my face? And maybe, now, because my arms too weak to push the quilt down the bed I tell myself I'm brave enough to go to Bayonne. But do what in Bayonne when the least little breeze will blow me down? (Gaines, 1972, p. 237)

The heroic figures have fostered in Miss Jane a new sense of herself, courage and determination to break with the hegemony of the dominant society. Thus, between the instinct for survival (the survival policy of the old), and the active militancy of the young, Miss Jane first reconciles positions within the black community and then crosses the line and defies white authorities and their exhortation to call the march off. "Me and Robert looked at each other there a long time, then I went by him" (Gaines, 1972, p. 246).

Servility is therefore outdone, annulled and replaced by a defiant and heroic African American woman, ready to confront white force, assert and maintain human integrity and decency. This attitude dislocates white myth of black inferiority and at the same time overturns white dominance. What she has done is a landmark action and has a long standing effect on blacks as well as on whites. Indeed, it bridges the gap between whites and blacks for a mutual understanding, which is also worked out in *A Gathering of Old Men*.

Through *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines proposes another discourse of interracial reconciliation, a collective agency in the reconstruction of a more equitable social order. The whole novel is about freedom and social justice. The individual act of self-defense of Big Charlie on his oppressor Beau Boutan turned into a criminal act and set whites and blacks into an antagonistic conflict that bring about other murders in both communities. The murder of a white person by a black constitutes a serious and decisive act of transgression of the racial taboo. At the same time, they are incidents that trigger mutual understanding across racial lines. In the process of tracking down the criminal, the case develops into some unexpected general trial, which for blacks, necessitates the excavation of the evils they have been victims of for generations.

In Gaines' vision of reconciliation, the stories and storytelling in which blacks engage, break their long unspeakable silence, and constitute, perhaps metaphorically, the version of the experience of black dehumanization, which at the same time throw a balance between white and blacks. Indeed, in their stories, the old black men grapple with the issues of life and death, their suffering and violence they have been subjected to for years; and in the process, they come to grips with the ultimate truth, that is, their social situation.

The impulse for reconciliation is laid by Charlie's unexpected rebellion and his death. First, he admits the following:

That's all I ever done, all my life, was run from people. From black, from white; from nigger, from Cajun, both. All my life. Made me do what they wanted me to do, and 'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong – all my life. And I took it. (Gaines, 1983, pp. 188-189).

But, as he says, time has come when this servile attitude of him needs to be discarded, in order for him to be a man: "But they comes a day! They comes a day when a man must be a man. They comes a day!" (Gaines, 1983, p.189) He and the other old men engage in a shooting against the white terrorist group:

Then you had nothing but shooting from then on. I was shooting, and it sounded like everybody in the world was shooting. It went on like that for about a minute. Then it was quiet, quieter than you ever heard in your life. (Gaines, 1983, p. 209).

When the shooting ends, everybody gathers around Charlie who got shot and hit the ground. Dirty Red reports:

I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on me. After I touched him, the rest of the men did the same. Then the women, even Candy. Then Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him too. (Gaines, 1983, pp. 209-210).

This tribute paid by the people to Charlie is symbolic of reconciliation not only between blacks but also between whites and blacks. And this reconciliation becomes more visible during the trial that went on for three days in a courthouse "packed every day, about an equal number of blacks and whites" (Gaines, 1983, p. 211), and in the presence of people from the news media "from all over the South." Lou Dimes, Candy's white friend concludes what has happened in the court:

The jury deliberated three hours, then returned with the verdict. After reading it and studying it for a moment, the judge told all defendants to rise, black and

white alike. He said since the two men who had killed were both dead, being the same two who had killed Beau and shot Mapes, he could not pass judgment over them, but ask that their souls rest in peace. (Gaines, 1983, p. 213).

In his last novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines uses almost the same motif of reconciliation between whites and blacks to overthrow white supremacist prejudice and justice. The murder of Gropé, an old white storekeeper by Jefferson, a young black, is not proved. That is, Jefferson may not have committed the crime, but he was sentenced to death because he was found on the spot of the crime at the wrong time. Actually, he would have been considered a witness if he were white. But, being black is the wrong color, and instead of being a witness, he is the initiator, the person who has designed and ordered the murder.

Taken into court for what can be termed as a parody of justice, the white lawyer committed to defend him pleaded for Jefferson's release focusing rather on his client's physical and intellectual "disabilities" and crowned his discourse calling him a "hog," a less than human being, therefore incapable of planning a crime: "Gentlemen of the jury, look at him – look at this. Do you see a man sitting here...? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand...Do you see a modicum of intelligence..." (Gaines, 1993, p. 7). This insult irritates Jefferson's godmother: "I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (Gaines, 1993, p. 13). She then commits Grant Wiggins, the black teacher on the plantation to lecture him into being a man before he meets death.

By the end of the novel, Jefferson's heroic encounter with death helps undermine whites' low opinion about blacks, their denial or exclusion of black humanity. Reconciliation therefore occurs in the process of Jefferson's lesson for manhood: a humanity that counters the argument of black inferiority, transforms and brings the flicker of communication and mutual understanding between whites and blacks. The example is Paul Bonin, the white deputy who has learned from Grant and Jefferson's mutual lessons and has come up with a new understanding. He accounts for Jefferson's execution:

He was the strongest man in that room, Grant Wiggins. He was, he was. I'm not saying this to make you feel good, I'm not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, 'Tell Nannan I walked.' And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked. (Gaines, 1993, pp. 253-254).

On the whole, within a conflictual social arena, Gaines' re-configuration of young black characters is essential in the process of reconciliation between whites and blacks. Indeed, he enforces upon those blacks a heroic tradition. They are immediate threats to the normative social structure, and they bear the burden as mediums for the playing out of racial tensions, which essentially remain transitional in Gaines' fiction. As Crisu (2007) argues,

Gaines manages to subvert in his novel the preexisting perception of intra- and inter-racial relations. Through the communal lesson, not only black people attain a complex awareness of themselves, but also white people acquire a new perspective upon blackness. While at the beginning of the novel, white people perceive African Americans in a degrading way, some of them gradually change their views. Impressed by Jefferson's Christ-like courage in the face of death,

Paul Bonin, for instance, is “converted” to a new understanding that transcends racial limits. Witnessing Jefferson’s death, Paul comes to testify for Jefferson’s heroic manhood, symbolically ingrained in his message: ‘Tell Nannan I walked.’ (p. 169).

Actually, Gaines creates new images, produces other myths, and stereotypes about the African American as well as the white Americans in order to counter or distort the debilitating ones produced and held by whites against blacks. All these new images and interactions across the racial boundaries suggest Gaines’ ethical commitment to justice, equality, and reconciliation. To some extent, Gaines concurs with Baldwin (1998) who asserts in his *The Fire Next Time* that “The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks – the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind” (p. 342).

On this axis of interracial reconciliation, Gaines devises new characters among whites and blacks to test the boundaries of difference, and new configurations of order and consciousness which occur in the bonds that are formed across the racial lines. These bonds dismantle the racially grounded binaries, and constitute the rope to move across or transcend racial communities.

2) Transcending Interracial Bonds: Racial Mediations for Reconciliation

Gaines’ fiction is replete with interracial relations across racial boundaries. As Robin Williams (1992) argues, “Human relationships rarely have single, clear unmistakable payoffs that can readily and accurately be calculated in advance, and ill-defined and paradoxical consequences often occur” (p. 43).

Though stripped of their humanity in a context of racial prejudices, Gaines’s fiction displays bonds across the racial lines that obliterate white supremacy, and constitute potential grains of reconciliation. In Gaines’ fiction, relations are not locked into the rigidities of limited perspectives; bonds are formed across the racial lines, bonds that transcend the traditional conflict between whites and blacks: they are racial mediations or some epistemic ruptures which dismantle the racial binaries. To illustrate some of these relational possibilities, I shall present the mutual understanding and love that expose the vulnerability of the color-line between whites and blacks.

In *Of Love and Dust*, on the margins of whites’ domination over blacks, there is a mutual understanding between Sidney Bonbon and Jim Kelly. As Hebert-Leiter (2006) writes,

Jim's conversations with Bonbon make the possibility of a bond between a white and a black man evident because it alludes to the possibility of mutual friendship and consideration. By addressing each other as individuals, Bonbon and Jim can begin to break from social categories in order to bridge the racial gap between them. (p.101).

In his relations with Bonbon, Jim Kelly realized the following:

Maybe if I hadn’t showed him how good I was he wouldn’t have put so much trust in me. He wouldn’t have treated me different from the way he treated all the others. He wouldn’t have told me things about himself, things about his family. Things he never told anybody else. (Gaines, 1967, p.147).

This confidence that is felt and expressed by Jim is the evidence of Bonbon being unprejudiced towards Jim. Prejudice, the cradle of conflict has therefore melted away. The bond between them seals up a fraternal and friendly link between both men, and when Bonbon killed Marcus, he could not but confess to Jim later:

He told me he didn't want to fight Marcus, he was hoping Marcus would run from him. If Marcus had made any attempt to run, he would have let him go, and there wouldn't have been a thing said about it." (Gaines, 1967, p. 277).

This confession exposes Bonbon's feeling of grief and qualms, which in turn is the expression of human understanding between a white and a black. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines goes a little further to construct a new form of interaction and behavior between two young men: one white and one black. They are football-players in the same team and their success is the result of their mutual dependency. Indeed, Gil (Gilbert Boutan) is opposed to his father as to the way the racial tension brought about by the murder of his elder brother should be resolved. He refuses violence as the solution, because, as he declares, his ambition is to be an "All-American":

Papa, I want to be an All-American at LSU. I have a good chance – Cal and me. The first time ever, black and white, in the Deep South. I can't make it without Cal, Papa. I depend on him. Every time I take that ball, I depend on his block, or his faking somebody out of my way. I depend on him, Papa, every moment I'm on that field. (Gaines, 1983, p.138).

Gil admits that his success and dynamism rest on his black teammate Cal (Calvin Harrison). They carry the names Salt and Pepper and their racial cooperation is a success. And as Mapes reports later, he [Gil] "told his daddy he needed Pepper and Pepper needed him" (Gaines, 1983, p.171). The union between Salt and Pepper is against the normative discourse of white superiority. Gil and Cal are a living example of racial interdependence, a symbolic reconciliation between whites and blacks. For Gil, and in contradiction with his father, who is still imbued with the old system of white supremacy, time has played a great role on the racial politics. When his father evokes the past to which he still holds for the traditional and violent response to Beau's murder, Gil indicates that,

Those days are gone, Papa. Those days when you just take the law in your own hand – those days are gone. These are the '70s, soon to be the '80s. Not the '20s, the '30s, or the '40s. People died – people we knew – died to change those things. Those days are gone forever, I hope. (Gaines, 1983, p.143).

For Gil, not only time, but also through human agency, a new order has taken over the old system made of hostility, conflict and violence between whites and blacks. In this evolution of race relations, God sides with the new order. According to Mapes, the white sheriff, "Not that He likes Fix, but He thought the other idea was better—Salt and Pepper" (Gaines, 1983, p.171). This new order requires equality and justice, and people should be judged as individuals, instead of branding them with group stereotypes and lynching them. Therefore, Salt and Pepper stand as agents of social and political change, an example of mutual understanding and respect, a racial conciliation which emerges from the imperatives of their interdependence.

Gil's attitude here transcends racial stereotypes. It is a deviation from the social norms or prescriptions that regulate the interracial relations. His request to his father is a project that could mediate new avenues of communication and mutuality across the color line. This racial interdependence cancels out the social stigmas which have established presumably the notion of whites' superiority over blacks. And as Hebert-Leiter (2006) notes, the novel

ends with a significant reversal of tradition when all the men responsible, including the black men, are freed because the guilty parties were killed in the shooting commotion, erasing the lynching ritual's power over this particular community and making African Americans and white Louisianans equal in the eyes of the law. (p. 114).

Aside from the above racial bonds that make the conciliation between the races a potential reality, Gaines' fiction similarly invests other modes of racial mediation through interracial love.

Of Love and Dust throws the reader into new considerations of the interracial relations, namely with the idea that love can cross racial boundaries and constitute a form of racial mediation. The novel bears two interracial romances: between Bonbon and Pauline, and between Marcus and Louise.

Actually, love is denied between the races because blacks are considered simply as objects, not individuals. And Bonbon, the white overseer has all the right to use sex as a tool of oppression against all the black women on the plantation. Sex is used as a form of punishment, serving as an instrument to consolidate white supremacy. According to that dehumanizing prescription, Bonbon used to have sex with most of the black women on the plantation till he met resistance from Pauline Guerin.

By the time I came there he had cut himself off from everybody there except Pauline. He went hunting and fishing with his brothers, but he had little to do with the rest of the people. And the reason was Pauline. The others didn't mind if he had this black woman. Everybody expected the white overseer to have a black woman – even his wife expected that. But when he started neglecting his wife for this black woman, then that was a different thing. The whites didn't like that at all, and the Negroes giggled about it. Bonbon knew how both sides felt, and he knew he couldn't go to either of them. (Gaines, 1967, p.147).

The ensuing relations between Bonbon and Pauline cease to be simply sexual. Instead of being a sexual outlet, Pauline is viewed as a human being and loved by Bonbon. This romance transgresses the racial barrier, and as Miss Julie Rand said, "He [Bonbon]'s more crazy 'bout Pauline than he is his own wife" (Gaines, 1967, p. 14). This love was not unrequited, for Pauline also fell in love with Bonbon:

After so many years, Pauline did fall in love with Bonbon. She couldn't help but fall in love with him. She knew he loved her more than he did his wife up the quarter or his people who lived on the river. (Gaines, 1967, p.66).

Their love breaks the social conventions, and bridges the racial gap like the one between Marcus and Louise. Motivated by their plans for revenge against Bonbon, both Marcus and Louise will be surpassed by mutual love that took place between them. Louise looked quite miserable when she has been taken to the plantation as Bonbon's wife. "She was fifteen then – That was ten years ago – but she acted like somebody eight or nine. She acted like a week-old calf that was led to a new pasture" (Gaines, 1967, p.162). Her physical and psychological conditions even arouse pity and lots of comments among black people on the plantation. Marcus for instance says that "She reminded him of a person who had been lost in the woods" (Gaines, 1967, p.126), and he calls her "Poor little thing" (Gaines, 1967, p.121). In the same perspective, Jim Kelly, the participant narrator says of her: "... her sad gray eyes were the only thing about her that made you feel Louise wasn't a child. They had seen too much sorrow, they had seen it much too long" (Gaines, 1967, p.119). As for Miss Julie Rand, she contrasts her with Pauline: "I feel sorry for her, not for Pauline. Pauline go'n look after herself. That other one I don't think she got 'nough sense to do it" (Gaines, 1967, p.14). On the whole, this portrayal of a white woman stands in opposition with the Southern Belle, the symbol of the white race superiority. Louise represents a counter stereotype: she is a degenerated person.

In the course of the novel, Louise will recover a new sense of life, a regeneration identifiable through the new human characteristics: the retrieval of her emotion or feeling that she has acquired out of her union with Marcus. For instance, Aunt Margaret says that she had

seen her smiling and for the first time “showing her teeth and her gun” (Gaines, 1967, p.206). As Margaret further reports to Jim,

Before Marcus came there she had never heard Louise cry in the house once. If she got mad about something, she just clamped her mouth and locked herself up in the room. She wouldn't open the door for Tile, Aunt Margaret or Bonbon. But she didn't do that anymore, she cried now when she couldn't have her way. (Gaines, 1967, p.233).

This rebirth into humanity is made possible by the mutual love between her and Marcus, which suggests that racial stereotypes and prejudices are nothing else but human deliberate construction. James Baldwin (1998) is right when he proclaims that, “Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality” (pp.345-346).

Oblivious of the racial barriers, Louise fell in love with Marcus, and together, they planned to leave the plantation so as to love each other freely. When Marcus got killed, Louise became insane: “The same night of the fight, some people had taken Louise to a hospital in New Orleans. Not long after that, they took her to Jackson – the insane asylum” (Gaines, 1967, p.278). In this case, their love transcends racial stereotypes and bridges the racial gap. As Hebert-Leiter observes,

Marcus succeeds not only in making Louise love him but also in falling in love himself. Marcus's love for Louise seems to exist beyond his notions of race and class because he does not disparage her ethnic identity as he does her husband's. Both of these interracial couples represent the possibility of love and acceptance regardless of racial notions of superiority and inferiority constructed by those in power. Although both affairs reflect popular historical notions of racial-sexual politics, Gaines frames them as sincere, perhaps to subvert and to deny previous stereotypes. (p. 104).

Beyond the racial notions of superiority and inferiority, both interracial love relations illustrate mutual consideration and racial mediation for reconciliation. On the whole, these characters created by Gaines are counter-stereotypes and their bonds annihilate racial stereotypes and show that racial categories are arbitrarily constructed. They call into question the distinction between whites and blacks, and they stand as evidence of commonalities between both races. These romances illumine the paradoxes and ambiguities, transmute white supremacy, and symbolically enact reconciliation across racial lines.

Conclusion

Though Gaines' fiction bears racial conflict, more is at stake than the focus on conflict. In other words, his objective does not lie in conflict. Admittedly, his fiction immerses itself in the details of specific racial conflicts while at the same time it configures the possibility of crossing racial boundaries. Gaines dreams of a more peaceful and just world for white and black Americans. In his articulation of the interracial relations, Gaines does not show bitterness. Instead of bitterness, he is rather inclined for racial compromises. This stands in resistance to the protest literature that requires violent actions and active militancy. On that account, he has been categorized as a nonpolitical or non activist writer. As a matter of fact, it is not that Gaines casts a blind eye on the ongoing white injustices against blacks. As John Lowe (1995) indicates, “Instead of anger, we find a sense of determined opposition to injustice, coupled with a warmth and sympathy toward all people” (p. xii). In the same light, Clark (2002) argues that “Gaines deconstructs the conventions of African-American protest discourse” (p.92).

Actually, in Gaines' fiction, the black and white opposition is nuanced in ways that transcend the notion of perpetrators and victims, the good and the bad. Far from being static or fixed, race as an oppressive concept within social relations is fluid, ever-changing, and racial tensions are transitional, eruptive moments. No doubt, one of the central perspectives Gaines grapples with in his fiction, is racial reconciliation. Through reconciliation, we mean new kinds of relations, based on peace and justice, with interracial respect and mutual understanding; it is the diminution of racial animosity: blacks and whites getting along better with each other.

Reconciliation in Gaines' fiction is always in process, an "unconstructed world," a perspective that is generally symbolic in Gaines's world. Yet, one can assume that it looms large ahead as conventions and realities break down (the dominant subject positions are undermined) and new realities or images to counter the evisceration of the black self are constructed, founded on the breakdown of the objectification of the dominated black. In other words, Gaines works out interracial compromises or reconciliation through the creation of counter stereotypes, images that deflect the ideology of white superiority.

Reconciliation between whites and blacks is necessary for the United States as a nation. Baldwin (1998) warns that: "... We, the black and white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation – if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women" (p.342). This is possible on the condition that whites accept blacks as their fellow citizens as equals, extending dignity and respect to them.

Thus, the relations across the racial line in Gaines' fiction represent a challenge to racial essentialism and constitute a seminal component of reconciliation, or at least a compromise, which is defined by Miller (2005) as: "an outcome to a conflict in which the parties involved concede in order to obtain only a portion of their objectives" (p.21). It occurs when "the contending parties lack the strength or ability to achieve a complete victory, seek to avoid escalation because of mutual interdependence, or value a future relationship with one another" (p.21).

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