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ABSTRACT

Literature seeks to recover the "facts" and fill in the gaps of knowledge as it enunciates the truth of existence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in African-American literature, where history and art are inextricably linked, where the personal truly is political. Throughout the history of the United States, the institution of slavery and subsequent policies of segregation have tainted the official record. But there was a concomitant, alternate record--the oral and written African-American tradition. Complicating matters, however, was the actual form of this tradition. Spirituals, sermons, letters, diaries, slave narratives as autobiography did not conform to the established, i.e., White male definition of literature. This paper, noting that the African-American literary tradition provides a cultural and historical record of the struggle for survival, freedom and equality, contends that African-American literature, besides striving to delight and teach, is committed to setting the record straight. To show an example of the African-American struggle, the paper gives a detailed analysis of a contemporary novel, "A Lesson Before Dying," by Ernest Gaines, which revolves around a murder--the result of the protagonist's being in the wrong place at the wrong time--and the degradation of racism in the South. The paper states that Gaines can be described as an author who gives voice to individuals silenced by history. Includes 41 notes. (NKA)

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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT IN ERNEST GAINES'S *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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Setting the Record Straight in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*

At the end of *Hamlet*, when Horatio declares that he is "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (5.2.284), the eponymous Prince importunes his friend to postpone his suicide in order to tell Hamlet's story. Other than Horatio, no one knows the truth that underscores the bloody stage spectacle. To the Court, Claudius has been an efficient ruler, a devoted husband and a concerned stepfather. Without a public confession from Claudius, Hamlet's behavior appears barbaric, his revenge looks like murder. Aware of his impending death, Hamlet needs Horatio to "[r]eport me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied" in order to heal his "wounded name" (5.2.281-2). Horatio must restore and protect Hamlet's reputation since, for Hamlet, "the rest is silence."

This compulsion for truth in the construction of identity and articulation of self resonates throughout literature. Although history pretends to truth, its writers reflect, instead, their preoccupations and prejudices. Any "fact" that contradicts or compromises this world view is revised, at best, and excised at worst. History as we receive it, and perhaps trust it, is, therefore,

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incomplete and unreliable. Literature, on the other hand, seeks to recover the "facts" and fill in the gaps of knowledge as it enunciates the truth of existence.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in African-American literature, where history and art are inextricably linked, where the personal truly is political. Throughout the history of this nation, the institution of slavery and subsequent policies of segregation have tainted the official record. Nevertheless, the record keepers successfully minimized the damage, relegating precious little space to these facts in the history books, denoting slavery as an economic imperative and Jim Crow as social necessity. But there was a concomitant, alternate record – the oral and written African-American tradition. Although valid and validating for African-Americans, the unfortunate fact of history is that until this alternative was acknowledged and accepted as a complement to the existing record, it remained unheard and unread by the dominant record keepers. Racism implicitly undermined any such acknowledgement, thus rendering this tradition non-existent.

Complicating matters further was the actual form of this tradition. Spirituals, sermons, letters, diaries, slave narratives as autobiography did not conform to the established, i.e., white male

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definition of literature. Nevertheless, the African-American tradition created a new aesthetic, an alternate voice to articulate an alternate experience – different, not deficient. Just different. To extrapolate from and paraphrase Alice Walker's defense of Janie Crawford's silence as a kind of speech act, African-Americans did not have to speak the way white men thought they should; they would choose when and where to speak because, while many African-Americans had never lost their voices, they also knew when it was better not to use them.[1] Simultaneously subversive and illuminating, this centuries old tradition prevailed because nothing less than the survival of a race depended on it. Here was incontrovertible proof that slaves were human beings. Faithful Christians, clever tricksters, victims and survivors, poets and critics of human nature, their literature gave the lie to the premise of slavery: that blacks were not human beings; that physical and cultural differences implied moral and mental inferiority; that blacks were incapable of intelligent thought; that blacks deserved to be, could only be chattel.

Paradoxically, even as slave owners maintained the fatedness of black enslavement, they feared the prospect of a literate black population. Not only would literacy prove intellectual

capabilities heretofore denied, the ability to read and write would awaken in slaves an awareness of other life possibilities. When his owner, Mr. Hugh Auld, learned that his wife, Sophia, had begun to teach Frederick Douglass how to read, he strictly forbade her to continue,

> telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read...'If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable...As to himself, it could do him no good...It would make him discontented and unhappy.' These words...[were] a new and special revelation...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man...From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom...to learn how to read.[2]

Through persistence and ingenuity, Douglass taught himself how to read. By age twelve,

> The thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart...As I read and contemplated the subject [the denunciation of slaver and vindication of human rights], behold! That very discontentment which Master Auld had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy...In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast...Any thing, no

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> matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me…Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever.[3]

Margaret Walker echoes Douglass's desire and discontent in her neo-slave narrative *Jubilee*.

> 'You thinks education gwine raise up the colored folks?' asked Innes. 'I always been told education don't do nothing but make a nigger a fool.'
>
> 'Well, that's the white man's attitude. He says an educated Negro gets ideas in his head about being free and equal, and that's the truth. When you can read and write and the white man can't make a fool out of you, he never likes it. You know it was against the law in slavery time to teach a black person how to read or write. The white man must have had some fear about educating colored people or he wouldn't have had the law. He knows as long as we are ignorant people we are helpless.'[4]

This historical and psychological verity then becomes the recurring motif in African-American life and literature. Whether a mode of resistance to assimilation and annihilation by slave owners, an indictment against slavery and its perpetrators, an expression of faith, hope and affirmation which covertly calls for deliverance from oppression on earth as well as in Heaven, or a timeless code of conduct and substantive values, the African-American literary tradition provides a cultural and historical record of the struggle for survival, freedom and equality. The very

existence of an African-American canon vindicates generations of slaves and their progeny. But in text after text, the characters must prove to themselves, their communities and their readers the viability of their existence and experience. African-American writers redefine and transform literary genres into eloquent articulations of their talent and skill, asserting the inherent worth of their characters as they dismantle centuries of prejudice and distortion. If, according to Sir Philip Sidney, poetry (and by extension all other literary genres) strives to teach and delight, then African-American literature is committed to an additional imperative – to set the record straight.

The ineluctability of African-American history is established in the first sentence of *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines. Connected to his community by this legacy, Grant Wiggins, the first person narrator, is not present at the murder trial of Jefferson, yet he knows the inevitable outcome. "I was not there, yet I was there...I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be".[5] On his way to the White Rabbit Bar and Lounge, Jefferson accepts a ride with Bear and Brother. They stop to get liquor, expecting the white store owner, Gropé, to extend them credit since Jefferson has no money either.

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However, Gropé refuses and Bear, who has been drinking, moves around the counter to persuade him otherwise. Gropé reaches for a gun, and when the shooting stops, Brother, Bear and Gropé are dead. Frightened and confused, Jefferson does not know what to do. He does not even know how to use a telephone to call for help. Instead, he grabs a bottle of whiskey and drinks to clear his head. Slowly, he realizes that he must get out of there. But first, thinking he is safe from witnesses, he stuffs money from the cash register into his jacket, even though his nannan has told him never to steal. And this is how two white men find him when they enter the store – clutching a bottle of whiskey, stolen money in his pocket and three dead bodies behind him on the floor.

Jefferson is clearly guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and making two very naïve decisions. However, the prosecutor depicts him as an "animal" who had colluded with Bear and Brother to rob and kill Gropé and was caught celebrating his new turn of luck. Though the defense argues the facts of the case, the attorney's language underscores the racism inherent in his position. He does not argue Jefferson's innocence because it is the truth but because Jefferson is physically and mentally incapable of planning and committing the crime. He consistently refers to

Jefferson as "this" and "boy", maintaining that, despite the fact that Jefferson is 21, "...when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this –this – this a man? No, not I".[6] He continues that since Jefferson is only "a boy and a fool", he is unaware of right and wrong, blindly follows directions, and was unable to discern Bear and Brother's true motives. An intelligent man never would have placed himself in such a compromising position. Furthermore, borrowing from the pseudoscience of phrenology to reinforce racist stereotypes, he argues Jefferson's biological and physiological inferiority to the court.

> Gentlemen of the jury...look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? I ask you, I implore you, look carefully – do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan – can plan – can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungles of blackest Africa – yes, yes, that he can do – but to plan?...No gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. That is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder.[7]

Miss Emma, Jefferson's nannan, has sat immobile throughout the trial, staring at the back of his head. As cruel and humiliating as this judicial mockery has been thus far, she only hears the attorney's final argument for mercy. "What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this".[8] Taught by experience what the verdict of twelve white men would be and that challenging it is absurd, Miss Emma can, nevertheless, disprove the trial's other premise – that Jefferson is less than human. "I don't want them to kill no hog," she says to Grant Wiggins. "I want a man to go to that chair on his own two feet".[9] Thus, Miss Emma enlists the unwilling Grant to teach Jefferson what it means to be a man so he can die like one. Though Jefferson rarely speaks initially and deliberately behaves hog-like, *A Lesson Before Dying* explore the process by which he perceives his innate value as a man and as a member of his community. Grant's narration and the deputy Paul's report are illuminating; but Jefferson's own words – his semi-literate diary – provide incontrovertible proof that he is human. This paper analyzes the connection between African-American history and Jefferson's notebook. The need to assert one's existence and identity through written language is

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more than a literary exercise. For a race that has been systematically silenced by law and tradition, writing is an act of survival as well as defiance, and Jefferson's notebook becomes one more document to set the record straight.

Grant Wiggins teaches the children of the Pichot Plantation in a one-room schoolhouse in Bayonne, Louisiana in 1948. He hates teaching the prescribed white curriculum in an inferior environment and does not think he has anything to offer Jefferson. Indeed, he doubts he can help any of his students. He resents the burden placed upon him by African-American history.

> 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 to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle – which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and may be even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind...What she [Miss Emma] wants is for him, Jefferson, and me to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years. She wants it to happen so...[she can] say proudly, 'You see, I told you – I told you he was a man.' And if she dies a half hour after that, all right; but what she wants to hear first is that he did not crawl to that white man...[b]ecause if he does not, she knows that she will never get another chance to see a black man stand for her.[10]

But as he watches his students chop wood for the winter, detached and estranged from his community, he laments the inexorability of that fate. The five older boys are doing the same work of previous generations and Grant does not see himself as capable of doing anything to break the cycle. He had not heeded the warning of Matthew Antoine, the mulatto schoolteacher who had silently railed at Grant and the others that "most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts...that there was no other choice but to run and run...because there was no freedom here...You just stay here long enough. [The white man] will make you the nigger you were born to be".[11] Though Grant refuses to capitulate to his vituperations and returns to Bayonne an educated man, he has ambivalent feelings about his role in the community. Matthew Antoine's words reverberate in his consciousness and by the time of the novel's action, he comes to believe them. "It doesn't matter anymore," he said. "Just do the best you can. But it won't matter".[12]

Weighted down with this legacy and this burden, Grant is supposed to teach Jefferson his worthiness even as he has not yet determined his own. Ironically, though he originally bristles at the prospect of visiting Jefferson and believes that, not only does he

have nothing to offer Jefferson, he will gain nothing from their interactions, we witness Grant's transformation in conjunction with Jefferson's. Grant must teach Jefferson how to die, but Jefferson teaches Grant how to live. Twenty-nine out of 31 chapters recount Grant's perspective of events and individuals, yet at the end of the novel, Grant is rendered speechless by Jefferson's demonstration of manhood. Though his tears obviously mourn Jefferson, they also represent Grant's assumption of his responsibility for his community. He faces his students at his most vulnerable moment, revealing a new found openness and willingness for connection.

The education system of which Grant is a part testifies to the truth of Matthew Antoine's execration of the South. To reinforce the narrative and thematic connection between Jefferson and the children, the length of his imprisonment parallels the academic year. In order to help with the planting, harvesting and grinding of sugar cane, the black children begin school one month later and get out two months earlier than the white children. Their intellectual worth is subsumed by their labor value. The economics of a Jim Crow South makes them more important to their community as workers than as thinkers. Grant teaches all grades in the Pichot Plantation church, where his efforts are seriously

undermined by inadequate facilities and materials. His circumstances are highlighted by the superintendent's annual visit, during which Grant diplomatically requests more materials. "I don't have all the books I need. In some classes I have two children studying out of one book. And even with that, some of the pages in the book are missing. I need more paper to write on, I need more chalk for the blackboards, I need more pencils, I even need a better heater".[13] The superintendent dismisses Grant with an indefensible yet predictable, "We're all in the same shape" and recommends more flag drill and emphasis on hygiene, ignoring the children's demonstrations of their academic achievements. His perfunctory compliment – "You have an excellent crop of students" – is an insincere repetition from the year before. Then, too, as during this visit, the superintendent calls Grant Higgins instead of Wiggins, diminishing his significance by ignoring Grant's correction and erasing his identity by essentially calling him out of his name. This episode dramatizes the legal inequities institutionalized by *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896 and reinforces the racial stereotypes which underscore Jefferson's defense. "...having denied human status to African-Americans on the basis of physiological differences, legislative bodies proceeded to outlaw

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teaching blacks to read and write and then justified denial of political access partly on the basis of intellectual deficiencies".[14] Jefferson cannot identify the names of Keats, Byron and Scott, representatives of the white literary canon, nor can he quote from the Constitution or the Bill of Rights because he has not been taught how to read adequately. Nevertheless, he is held to the white standard of literacy against which he can never measure, and in the economy of Southern white society, he is deemed less than human.

Throughout the novel, the degradation of racism is apparent. Grant is made to wait hours for the sheriff and is searched each time he visits Jefferson; Miss Emma and Tante Lou are never invited to sit down by Henri Pichot, despite their age and years of service to his family. However, Grant subverts the system by speaking correctly and not automatically affixing "sir" to the end of each sentence. He moderates his behavior, knowing when to be quiet – '[t]o show too much intelligence would be an insult to them" - but knowing too that "[t]o show a lack of intelligence would have been a greater insult to me".[15] Jefferson, on the other hand, does not enjoy such discursive options. He does not speak at his trial, denied a voice with which to articulate his story, his self,

by the system. And though he enjoys the "benefit" of legal representation, he is not tried by a jury of his peers. The voice of the community is also silenced by the practice that renders black men ineligible to serve as jurors because they are not registered voters. The regressive, repressive cycle extends back before their grandfathers. When he finally speaks on page 73, he utters the bitter hopelessness of his condition and eerily echoes Matthew Antoine. "It don't matter...Nothing don't matter...Chicken, dirt, it don't matter...All the same." Grant's subsequent visits are met with indifference and silent rage. Jefferson heard and comprehended his trial; defined by the attorney's racist idiom, he has processed the language and is now acting accordingly. When Grant is finally alone with him, Jefferson is unkempt and disheveled, asks for corn because "that's what hogs eat", grunts in his throat and roots around the bag of food, eating without using his hands. To Grant's assertion of his humanity, Jefferson replies, "Y'all youmans...I'm a old hog they fattening up to kill for Christmas."[16] Though both men have endured 300 years of race hatred, Grant has, at least, armed himself with an education with which to confront the ignorance of prejudice. Jefferson, on the other hand, has worked in the fields

since he was six and does not possess the subtlety of thought which would have enabled him to deflect the attorney's insult. Jefferson has been treated like a workhorse and called a hog; therefore, it must be true. The love and nurturing that his nannan has provided for 21 years is insufficient defense against centuries of humiliation and servility. Caught in the vicious cycle that racism engenders, Jefferson internalizes the lawyer's description and its repulsive implications because the system the lawyer represents has denied Jefferson any alternative self-conception or the means by which to constitute his true identity. Ironically, through his semi-literate diary, Jefferson will reclaim his voice and his dignity. He may not know who Keats is, but he knows who he is. "[And] that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

According to Ernest Gaines, Jefferson's "brain has not had the chance to get the light that would make him aware of all the things a man should possibly be aware of."[17] The "light" Grant must shed on Jefferson's "brain" is not conventional intellectual bromides to make up for decades of illiteracy. Rather, Grant must reinvigorate Jefferson with a sense of himself as other than a workhorse, and his value as a member of his community by virtue of his being, not his brawn, assumptions that have been denied and

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dissipated by 400 years of history and social policy. The hallmark of American literature is the definition of self and the realization of the individual. African-American literature includes another characteristic which emerges directly from a history of bondage and oppression: the healthy and successful incorporation of the individual into his community and the forging of his identity consonant with the community's needs in order to preserve and perpetuate the community. Even as Grant reluctantly moves from the margins to the center of his community, he guides Jefferson to his proper place whence he can fashion himself a man and connect with other black men.

Although Grant has the vocabulary with which to articulate his anger and frustration at a debilitating system, Jefferson is rendered mute and turns his rage inward or against those who love and seek to help him. Each time Aunt Emma visits or Grant is alone with him, Jefferson refuses to eat any of the food she has prepared: fried chicken, yams, biscuits, tea cakes and pralines. When he roots through the food to show Grant he is a hog, Grant's words fall on deaf ears. "You're a human being, Jefferson. You're a man...I won't tell her what you did...that would kill her. So I'm going to lie...I'm going to tell her how much you liked the

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food...You don't want me to come back here anymore?...[The white man] said I will never be able to make you understand anything...You want me to stay away and let him win?"[18] Grant appeals to Jefferson on many levels, none of which move him: the direct assertion of his manhood; his obligation to his nannan; triumph over the white man. Jefferson's expression remains unchanged – "cynical, defiant, painful." Painful for Grant to look upon and full of the pain Jefferson is enduring. Grant pretends to the deputy Paul that everything has gone well in order not to give Sheriff Guidry the satisfaction of his failure, and reassures Miss Emma that Jefferson ate all her food and asked about her so that she can believe Grant is making progress. But Jefferson does not care to spare anyone's feelings, ignoring Miss Emma, forcing her to sit uncomfortably on a small corner of his bunk, asking if she's brought him corn, compelling her to slap him when he persists in his "hog" mode.

Jefferson's attitude toward the food is crucial to the novel's narrative and thematic progression. Prison food is inadequate: "one hot meal a day and a sandwich. Lots of beans, cabbage, potatoes, rice."[19] Miss Emma supplements this diet, not only because it is not nutritious, but because it is the only permissible way she has to

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continue to nurture Jefferson. The food, however, represents more than Miss Emma's love. It symbolizes connection and obligation to the human community, which Jefferson does not yet recognize but which Grant will gradually demonstrate for him. Angry at his circumstances and impending execution, Jefferson has turned inward for self-protection and does not see the need to sympathize with his nannan or minimize her pain, which he can do simply by eating her food. Since he is going to die, he does not have to show concern for any other human being. He has already severed any tenuous connection he may have had with others. Grant reminds him that everyone is going to die, but no one knows when, and this fact of life does not excuse him from behaving well. "Manners is for the living…Food for the living too",[20] he rationalizes as he moves further beyond Grant's emotional reach. He even rejects Grant's characterization of him as a human being because he speaks, rejecting also the moral obligations implicit in his humanity to give his nannan something to be proud of.

Maintaining that his imminent death obviates any responsibility to or connection with the human community, Jefferson ironically begins his return to and reintegration with humanity when his execution date is set. He is going to die two

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weeks after Easter, between noon and three on a Friday afternoon; the coincidence is not lost on Jefferson, nor is the hypocrisy lost on Grant. Jefferson's trial and sentence have been determined without the input of a single black person; now his execution date is set so as not to violate anyone's religious sensibilities even as his executioners forget the scriptural injunction to show mercy. The novel's action spans the time between Christmas and Easter, making Jefferson a facile Christ symbol, though for a long time this Christ figure is in Gethsemane. Initially, Jefferson resists the expectation that he take up everyone's cross. "Y'all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins." No one ever carried Jefferson's cross. He worked in the fields, endured cursing and beating even "[g]rinned to get by. Everyone thought that's how it was s'pose to be."[21] He believed that obediently doing his work was all that God expected from him. And with no life experiences to prepare him, now Jefferson is expected to be "better than everybody else" – but he does not know how or necessarily why. The thrust of Grant's lesson about Jefferson's humanity is that he apprehends the moral imperative of reciprocity in human connections. Jefferson must recognize that what Miss Emma has done for him transcends familial obligation and represents the ethical underpinning of all social engagement.

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Human beings do for each other because to do otherwise is barbaric.

To insure the lesson's universality and constancy, Jefferson must also perceive his connection to the community in order to comprehend his inherent place therein. But his self-awareness occurs in painfully slow increments. Grant must undo the damage of centuries. A lone gift for Jefferson under the Christmas tree, pecans and peanuts from the children, news of the quarter and, perhaps, most crucial, the radio, purchased with contributions from the community. Jefferson has never owned anything and now he has this radio which he never turns off. It connects him to the living, reminding him that he is a man even as it diverts his attention from his impending death. Despite the fact that Reverend Ambrose calls the radio a sin box and Jefferson prefers to stay in his cell and listen to it rather than go to the day room to visit Miss Emma without it, Grant reminds them that since he has had the radio, Jefferson has not called himself a hog. The radio connects Jefferson to the external world, but he remains, nevertheless, self-absorbed. He does not yet comprehend the abstractions of connection and obligation which Grant must teach him so that he can perceive himself a man. In the manner of a

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child, Jefferson relates the radio to Grant. But the more recondite concepts of moral reciprocity continue to elude him. Having done for others all her life, Miss Emma wants Jefferson to do only two things for her before she dies: walk to his execution like a man and eat her food. She has enlisted Grant to effect the former; she does not understand why the latter is such a monumental task. She may understand the machinations of the legal system, but she cannot fathom the levels of despair and debasement to which Jefferson has been driven by the attorney's language. Jefferson's trial directly enunciated the degradation of racism and codified it in his verdict and sentence; unable to speak against the system, Jefferson projects his anger toward those more helpless than he, asserting a negative power by deliberately hurting Miss Emma. To her, the food is an expression of love and nurturance, all that she has to give Jefferson. But it also symbolizes communal sharing and perpetuation of tradition and history through conversation, anecdote and memory, qualities essential to the construction of social identity. By eating with Miss Emma, Reverend Ambrose and Grant, Jefferson participates in a ritual that defines and preserves community. However, he is not yet ready to accept the complex ramifications of such a simple gesture. When Grant asks

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Jefferson to go to the dayroom, even without his radio, to make Miss Emma happy, Jefferson agrees rather robotically. "You'll do it for me, for her?" draws only a dissociated "All right." "I want to be your friend...Will you do that for me?...Do you believe I'm your friend, Jefferson? Do you believe I care about you?" meets with silence. "He was not listening."[22] As Grant prepares to leave and asks if Jefferson has a message for Miss Emma, his response again is silence, but this time his face is filled with pain, as if he wants to say something to her but does not know what or how. Instead of a message for his nannan, however, he stammers a thank you to the children for the pecans. Finally, and with trepidation, Jefferson makes a tentative reciprocal gesture toward connection upon which Grant can base his other lesson.

Nevertheless, upon their next visit in the day room, Jefferson again initially refuses to eat. Whether to spare Miss Emma further disappointment or to capitalize on Jefferson's earlier breakthrough, Grant takes him for a walk during which he appeals to Jefferson's conscience, his responsibility, his humanity. A friend does little things to please another. Will he eat some gumbo to please his nannan? A hero does things other men don't or can't. Will he show the white man "the difference between what

they think you are and what you can be." Will he prove to them and his nannan and the children that he has dignity, heart and love for his people? "A myth is an old lie that people believe in."[23] Will he disprove the racist myth that has oppressed his people by standing and thinking, thus affirming a common humanity? Somehow, in his exhortation, Grant transforms the black man's burden of history into an act of personal and communal vindication that Jefferson can and should perform. By revealing his own needs and exposing his own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, Grant particularizes history, personifying all the lost and broken men who abandoned the South and the women and children they left behind helpless. When he is finished, he looks at Jefferson for some sign of recognition. Jefferson is crying and Grant interprets his tears hopefully. "...I cry, not from reaching any conclusion by reasoning, but because, lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole..."[194]

Grant is correct to impute this epiphany to Jefferson. He eats Miss Emma's gumbo, and we hear him process his agreement to assume the cross Grant has shifted to his shoulders. The novel has been punctuated by Jefferson's silences, his hog-like grunts, his perfunctory responses; only now, as he contemplates his

ultimate role in his community, does he engage in deductive reasoning by which he concludes, "Yes, I'm youman." Throughout the novel, Grant has told him that he is human, but Jefferson's declaration is more than mere acquiescence to Grant's efforts to satisfy Miss Emma. Jefferson is not human because Grant says he is. Rather, he synthesizes the traits that would define him thus on his own terms, in his own words. His phonetic spelling and pronunciation - *youman* – reflect more than dialect. Jefferson reappropriates the naming power from the white community, forging a linguistic as well as physical connection with his people by reconstituting his identity outside a disparaging racist idiom. Moreover, Jefferson's assertion of his humanity proceeds syllogistically from all he has heard but appears to have ignored. When he promises to do his best, Grant extols his courage and commitment. "You're more a man than I am." Jefferson's response, "'Cause I'm go'n die soon? That make me a man?"[25] demonstrates sophisticated philosophical reasoning. Earlier, Jefferson dissociated himself from the community, abrogating responsibility and civility because he is going to die. In an effort to reintegrate him, Grant observes that since all men die, his insolence is inexcusable, unacceptable and irrelevant. This

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argument, however, fails to deter Jefferson from his self-exile. He is, as yet, unwilling and unable to accept the obligations of inclusion because he does not see himself as human. Now, however, as he speaks his life and impending death, he recognizes the paradox of his emerging self-awareness: because he is a man, he is going to die, and because he is going to die, he is a man.

Ironically, his death, which makes him like other men, immediately sets him apart. He is a Christ figure and even he metaphorizes his role in the community. Earlier he confuses Christmas with Easter, eventually remembering that "Easter when they nailed Him to the cross. And he never said a mumbling word." And for a long time, neither does Jefferson. But as he processes the community's needs and expectations, his moral obligation to "show some understanding, some kind of love",[26] he realizes that he must take up all of their crosses – Grant's, his nannan's, his own. The Christ imagery is readily apparent here: the Cross, an innocent young man dying an undeserved death to redeem the sins of other men. But the symbolism goes beyond the obvious. Jesus was alone in Gethsemane, contemplating and temporarily resisting his ordained fate, wondering if his Apostles, the best of the twelve, even understood his life as they lay sleeping

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nearby. They do not share his suffering nor the Passion of this moment. Similarly, Jefferson challenges his community. "Y'all axe a lot...Who ever carried my cross?...What about me? What people done done to please me?"...Nobody didn't know that [I'm youman] before now."[27] Not even Grant. Despite the questions and the doubts, both men transform their worlds. However, whereas Jesus submits to God – "Thy will be done" – Jefferson deliberately asserts his will to "do his best". Jesus has always known his purpose; Jefferson apprehends it only now as he synthesizes those qualities that define him as a man. His public duty must transcend his private pain. In that capacity, Jefferson brings his community together. His strength and courage give them something of which to finally be proud and so they stay away from work on the day of his execution to honor him and to impress upon the white community the value of Jefferson's life and the significance of his death. Similarly, the children dramatize their relationship to Jefferson by remaining on their knees during the hours of the execution. In this posture of suffering and humility, they give him all "their respect this one day."

Jefferson's increased orality in this scene represents his evolving acceptance of his humanity. As Grant has pointed out

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earlier, the ability to speak is quintessentially human. But the desire for verbal engagement attests to a higher faculty: inferiority brought forth for articulation and connection is a sign of intellectual and social maturity. Jefferson's communicativeness emerges from the thought fragments and observations that comprise his notebook. Grant offers him the notebook after he remarks Jefferson's striking response to the radio. If he wrote things down that they could later talk about, perhaps Jefferson would eventually see Grant as the friend he wants to be. At first, his agreement is reflexive; but after Grant's encouraging monologue on myths and heroes in the prison day room, Jefferson picks up the notebook and pencil and begins to write. Grant wonders what he will write about, what his handwriting will look like. What he finds is a pencil worn down to the wood and large, awkward, illegible writing that does not adhere to any orthographic or grammatical rules. Jefferson's first entry describes his fear and humiliation. Rendered from Grant's educated perspective, it reads

> I dreampt it again last night. They was taking me somewhere. I wasn't crying. I wasn't begging. I was just going, going with them. Then I woke up. I couldn't go back to sleep. I didn't want to go back to sleep. I didn't want to dream no more. There was a lot of erasing, then he wrote: If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the

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> head like a hog? Starb me like a hog? More erasing, then: Man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs.[28]

Even though Jefferson reveals incipient thoughts about his humanity – he is not being treated like the hogs he has handled on the farm; he walks on two feet and hogs walk on four hooves – he reverts to his familiar, oppressed muteness. "I ain't got nothing more to say, Mr. Wiggins." Encouraging Jefferson to defy the peremptory silencing of history, most recently represented by his attorney, through self-expression, Grant counters, "I'm sure you have." And Grant is correct. The far-reaching conversation that ensues confirms Jefferson's comprehension of his moral obligation to Miss Emma and the community at large. "I'm the one got to do everything, Mr. Wiggins. I'm the one."[29] And his notebook/diary, which appears immediately thereafter narratively, records his thoughts and observations of people and experiences, and reveals insights and understanding available only to a thinking, feeling, human being.

Centuries before Jefferson sat on death row, the victim of an onerous patriarchy, his literary archetype sat in a mythological prison in ancient Greece. Raped by her brother-in-law Tereus and mutilated by him so that she cannot speak his name, Philomela

represents the prototypcal obliteration of identity: she is thoroughly objectified by socially-sanctioned violence; the boundaries that define and protect relational identities are transgressed and erased; the ability to speak – the faculty that makes her human – is brutally taken from her. Subscribing to a patriarchal construct of language as male and oral, Tereus does not believe that Philomela poses a threat because she can no longer speak. Moreover, he does not consider any other mode of communication valid. Consequently, when Philomela reappropriates language using a medium Tereus never would have countenanced, she is able to tell her story and prevail against the system. She weaves the story of her rape and mutilation, and her sister is able to read the pattern and understand its import. Philomela's tapestry symbolizes resistance to the rigid codes of patriarchal speech and provides a means by which to subvert those codes within an alternative, legitimate idiom.

Jefferson's diary achieves much the same effect as Philomela's tapestry in its composition. Six months prior, he was called a hog in court, his defense founded on his perceived sub-human status. Silenced by the system, Jefferson is unable to relate his story, that is, constitute his identity through language – the requisite idiom – until now. But the silencing began long before his

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court appearance. Forced into the field at age six, Jefferson never expected anything else for himself except to work, be beaten and get cussed at. Neither did Grant, nor the others. Now that he has accepted his new role in the community and is able to call himself *youman*, he reclaims his voice and dignity. The novel reflects the nominal education Jefferson received, another indictment against the system. But, despite its violation of all the rules of "literacy" – punctuation, spelling, sentence construction – the notebook inscribes Jefferson's authentic thoughts, feelings and observations heretofore inaccessible to us through Grant's correct usage, related to us directly from Jefferson, unmediated by the patriarchy. Unrestrained by commas and periods, the pauses and full stops of life, or verb tenses that would confine him to a single time and place, Jefferson is able to move seamlessly between memory and experience, observation and insight, shrugging off the shackles of history that have confined him for 21 years as he achieves self-definition through self-expression.

Clearly, Grant is aware of his ability to dismantle patriarchal constructs through his appropriate use of language. Despite his education, he is expected to conform to society's definition of a black man: humble, compliant, inarticulate. Instead,

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Grant uses correct grammar and refuses to automatically punctuate sentences with the requisite "sir". Resentful of Grant's education and suspicious of his intelligence, Sheriff Guidry bets Louis Rougon, another white man, that Grant cannot transform Jefferson from a hog into a man. Now, here is incontrovertible proof, inscribed in perpetuity, that Grant has succeeded. The innate power of written language, even Jefferson's marginal, non-standard English, is substantiated by the sheriff's reaction to his notebook. If the sheriff were not convinced of Jefferson's ability to assert his humanity through his words, he would not be concerned about Jefferson's entries regarding his incarceration.

> ...he ax me what all I been ritin an I tol him jus things an he say aint he done tret me rite an I tol him yesir an he say aint his deptis done tret me fair an I tol him yesir an he say aint he done let peple vist me anytime an I say yesir an he say didn he let the chiren an all the peple from the quarter com an visit me jus two days ago an I say yesir an he say is you gon put that in yo tablet an I say yesir an he say good put that down in yo tablet I tret you good all the time you been yer...[30]

After centuries of submitting to arbitrary constructions of identity fashioned by the patriarchy, Jefferson has inadvertently reversed the process. The sheriff now depends on Jefferson's written testimony, that is his word picture of how Guidry has

conducted himself over the past six months, for public validation of his existence. Ironically, a white man's identity is now contingent on a black man's construction of it. Furthermore, Paul, the sympathetic white deputy who has served as intermediary between Jefferson, Grant, Miss Emma, Reverend Ambrose and the sheriff, honors Jefferson's last request and respects his privacy, a privilege Jefferson has never previously enjoyed. "I didn't open his notebook...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..." [31] *I would like to know his thoughts sometime*. At the start of the novel, the white men in the courtroom did not think Jefferson capable of conceiving a thought, let alone writing it down. Now they want to know what he is thinking and how he is conveying those thoughts, one for self-protection, the other out of deference for the man. Paul provides further testimony of Jefferson's humanity when he reports to Grant, "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."[32] Grant is absent from Jefferson's execution because he does not have the courage to witness it.

Jefferson must be brave for all of them, the novel tells us. But the report of his dignity and stature must come to Grant and the reader from a white observer in order to more emphatically confirm Miss Emma's unshakeable faith in Jefferson. "...he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so."[33]

Jefferson's oral declaration of his humanity and his willingness to assume his moral obligation as a valued, valuable member of his community are the logical result of the private reflections and ruminations he records in his diary. Silenced by history and rendered only through Grant's narration, Jefferson remains impenetrable to us for the majority of the novel. Here, at last, Jefferson narrates himself, revealing impressions of others we never knew he had or even cared to formulate. More important, he reconstructs his relationship with the community, abandoning his former self-absorption for a more empathic posture. This brief segment consolidates narrative time but thematically expands Jefferson's self-understanding as he finally apprehends that the pain and suffering imposed by history is a shared experience not his isolated phenomenon. He regains his dignity and humanity through his own words and even achieves a poetic eloquence

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presumed impossible of him by a demeaning patriarchy. Gaines writes of Jefferson's diary,

> I needed something to get into Jefferson's mind, to show you who this was, and what was going to happen. Who this simple little waterboy, or cottonpicker, or whatever he was, was; it had to be clear he was the savior of Grant, so Grant could save the children. The way I could get that over to the reader was to let Jefferson make those little attempts to explain himself. The diary was there for the reader to see who he was."[34]
>
> The diary is also there for Jefferson to see who he is.

His first entries reveal a legitimate fear of his impending fate and lingering questions about the nature of God. The recurring image of a door offers ominous interpretive possibilities to Jefferson. Is the electric chair behind it? Does it symbolize death or the grave or heaven? Both Grant and Jefferson come from a strong religious tradition; whereas Jefferson has a nominal understanding of matters of faith, Grant initially speaks to him only of the morality and obligations of manhood rather than dogma and doctrine. He willingly leaves those lessons to Reverend Ambrose, who believes Grant is actively undermining him with his defiant skepticism. Grant refuses to tell Jefferson to humble himself on his knees before God. "I won't tell him to kneel. I will try to help him

to stand." Kneeling has not helped Grant – nor has the concept of heaven. But he respects Jefferson's intellect enough to neither lie to him nor force his doubts upon him. "I don't believe in it...I'll never tell him not to believe in it...I'll tell him I don't know...I couldn't lie to him at this moment. I will never tell him another lie, no matter what."[35] Instead, he encourages Jefferson to pray to ensure his place in heaven because his nannan believes in heaven and needs to know Jefferson will be there beside her. Just as he believes Jefferson's courage will make him brave, Grant relies on Jefferson's faith to inspire his own.

Nevertheless, before he assumes the Cross without "a mumbling word", he is uncomfortable during an Easter visit when Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose ask him to pray for heaven. "I was glad when Paul came and got me." Another night, unable to sleep, he contemplates God's justice in a friend's life. Why did God let Samson's wife die instead of people "like them matin brothers"; why does He mess with "po foks who aint never done nothin but try an do all they kno how to serv him." As he remembers the thankless work of his childhood, he concludes that "the lord just work for wite folks" and wonders how merciful God is if "he don't giv a man a little breeze." He worries about Boo,

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who drunkenly challenges God to strike him with lightening. "I know you don't love nobody but wite folks cause you they god not mine...cause no niger aint got no god." "[I] wonder if Boo went to heven cause I know he didn git religin firs."[36]

Jefferson wants Grant to grade his work, to validate "his written expression of his emerging self."[37] Consequently he is disappointed by the B he receives; Grant wants him to delve further into his unconscious, and though Jefferson does not understand initially, when he begins to write about love, he earns a B+. He does not know how to tell Grant he likes him because he has neither uttered nor heard the words before. He is uncertain whether love and care and work are interchangeable behaviors in relation to Miss Emma. But he does know he wants to see her once more before his execution and deduces that this must be love. During their last visit, Jefferson proves to Miss Emma that her faith in him has not been misplaced. Now she knows Jefferson is the black man to stand for her after 300 years of waiting. "I tol her I love her an I tol her I was strong an she pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good an I let her hol me long is she want cause you say it was good for her an I tol her I was strong."[38] Even his nannan, the person who reared

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him and loves him unconditionally, has never kissed him. Though she does not mean to hurt him, Miss Emma has sent a mixed message for 21 years that contributes to Jefferson's confusion about what love is and his inability to accept it from those around him. Rather than traditional displays of emotion, which suggest a dangerous vulnerability that the system can further exploit, Miss Emma sublimates those feelings and demonstrates her love for Jefferson through her faith in him and the food she prepares. Even though his final meal of okra, rice, pork chops, corn bread and clabber is "the bes meal I kno my nannan ever cook", the poignancy of this moment lies not in her food nor in her interminable hug, but in the fact that her first kiss for Jefferson is also her last.

Jefferson's relationship to the community is underscored by their visits to him, especially Grant's students; and his apology to Grant for insulting Vivian earlier out of anger and frustration highlights his sensitivity to the feelings of others. An even more touching example occurs when he patiently waits for Bok, a mentally retarded character, to choose an appropriate marble to give Jefferson as a parting gift. He cries now, for the first time, after all his visitors leave him profoundly aware of his value to his

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community. "They hadn never done nothing lik that for me befor." And he cries, too, over Grant's friendship, further confirmation of his humanity, because, "nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im somebody."[39]

His self-knowledge extends to the confidence to reveal the fawning hypocrisies of those around him that he has intuited over his six month imprisonment and probably decades of silent observation. He speaks directly to his jailers, unafraid of any posthumous repercussions. "I don't care if he do see it after im dead and gone." Paul is the only one who knows how to "talk like a youman to people"; Clark is mean and Jefferson does not even look at him when he speaks; he comprehends the bet between Sheriff Guidry and Louis Rougon; and when Henri Pichot gives him his pearl-handled knife, Jefferson reminds him "just for a few days an you can hav it back." Jefferson manifests a directness and self-possession here that is conspicuously absent six months earlier.

Juxtaposed to this unwonted assuredness in the face of the patriarchy is a rare, poetic vulnerability. In order to expose himself so thoroughly, Jefferson must trust Grant completely. This quality, another characteristic of human connection and commitment, can

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come only after Jefferson trusts himself, and the diary reveals that he does. He is touched by the emotional generosity of others and is prepared to extend his own: he admits that he cries, that he loves his nannan and Grant, that he has made mistakes, that he will miss them and that he is afraid.

> sun goin down an I kno this the las one im gon ever see but im gon see one mo sunrise cause I aint gon sleep tonite
>
> im gon sleep a long time after tomoro
>
> they got a moon out ther an I can see the leves on the tree but I aint gon see no mo leves after tomoro
>
> its quite quite an I can yer my teefs hitin an I can yer my hart
>
> day breakin
>
> sun comin up
>
> the bird in the tre soun like a blu bird
>
> sky blu blu mr wigin
>
> good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man
> sincely jefferson[40]

Jefferson regains his humanity through language, his self-expression achieving a powerful, imagistic eloquence as he documents his personal renaissance. "[Y]ou know the a aint too far."

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Described as an author who gives voice to individuals silenced by history, Ernest Gaines says of Jefferson, "I knew that before dying he had to make a great statement, make it just before he sat in the chair...the only thing he could say was 'Tell Nannan I walked', and that was the most profound thing he *could* say."[41] Jefferson has stood stoop-shouldered throughout the novel – physically shackled by his prison irons, linguistically diminished by the appellation "hog", psychologically contracted by an absence of self-esteem, metaphorically weighed down by the burden of history. Miss Emma has wanted only one thing – that someone do something for her before she dies. If Jefferson cannot stand for, then no man ever will. By the time Jefferson asks Reverend Ambrose to "Tell Nannan I walked", that message is directed to the entire community, black and white. The diary bears witness to the evolution of Jefferson's character and resolve; only after he synthesizes all of the lessons – Grant's words, Miss Emma's food, the children's gifts, the townspeople's visits, Paul's concern – can he finally stand tall and strong and be better than everybody else. Just like the model of sacrifice centuries earlier whom he resembles, Jefferson's act transforms him and all he touches and rewrites history irrevocably.

Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), xii.

2. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 29.

3. Douglass, 33.

4. Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966), 395. A disturbing footnote to Douglass and Walker appears in "A Slave in New York," *The New Yorker*, 24 Jan. 2000, 50-61. Moctar Teyeb escaped from slavery in Mauritania four years ago. In this profile, he describes a system that deliberately kept him illiterate in order to better subdue him, much like the obstacles to slave literacy Douglass and Walker describe.

5. Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Random House, 1993), 3.

6. Gaines, 7.

7. Gaines, 7-8.

8. Gaines, 8.

9. Gaines, 13.

10. Gaines, 166-7.

11. Gaines. 62-3, 65.

12. Gaines, 66.

13. Gaines, 57.

14. Karen Carmean, *Ernest Gaines: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 128-9.

15. Gaines, 47.

16. Gaines, 83.

17. William Parrill, "An Interview with Ernest Gaines," in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 199.

18. Gaines, 83-4.

19. Gaines, 127.

20. Gaines, 130.

21. Gaines, 224.

22. Gaines, 185.

23. Gaines, 192.

24. Gaines, 194.

25. Gaines, 225.

26. Gaines, 139.

27. Gaines, 222, 224.

28. Gaines, 220.

29. Gaines, 223.

30. Gaines, 233.

31. Gaines, 255.

32. Gaines, 254.

33. Gaines, 256.

34. John Lowe, "An Interview with Ernest Gaines" in *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*, ed. John Lowe (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 300.

35. Gaines, 216-217.

36. Gaines, 227-228.

37. Carmean, 121.

38. Gaines, 237.

39. Gaines, 231-232.

40. Gaines, 232-234.

41. Lowe, 299.

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