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ReSciLaC (Revue des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication) est une revue du Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO) de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC). ReSciLaC est une revue pluridisciplinaire qui accueille des contributions abordant un grand nombre de champs d'études des sciences humaines et sociales.

ReSciLaC permet de faire la diffusion de travaux de jeunes chercheurs ou de chercheurs confirmés *en sociolinguistique, en linguistique, en didactique des langues, en communication, en littérature, en philosophie du langage, en sciences de l'éducation, en sociologie, histoire, histoire de l'art, etc.*

L'objectif de ReSciLaC est d'encourager des discussions scientifiques et théoriques les plus larges possibles portant aussi bien sur les sciences humaines que sur les sciences sociales.

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**AFRICAN AMERICANS' EMPOWERMENT THROUGH
INDIVIDUAL ENDEAVOR AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN *THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN* BY ERNEST GAINES**

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Abstract

Lots of biases still engage black people in the US in the role of content subservient beings for whom the battles for liberation from slavery and full equality have always been waged from without, or only with the support and encouragement of white benevolent do-gooders. The duty to tell the local stories of the struggles for liberation waged by black people themselves through individual commitment and battles, and small-scale leadership is therefore a necessity. Within the interpretive frameworks of new historicism and cultural studies, this paper probes the local, small narratives of African Americans in their fight for freedom, for an egalitarian society, and their resistance to white supremacy and dehumanizing cruelties. It focuses on Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and analyzes the evolution of black "local" leadership from the Emancipation Proclamation to the 1960s Civil Rights movement as it appears in the novel.

Keywords: African American – leadership – freedom – fight – equality

Résumé

Beaucoup de préjugés engagent encore les Noirs, aux États-Unis, dans le rôle d'êtres asservis et soumis pour qui les batailles pour la libération de l'esclavage et pour l'égalité intégrale ont toujours été menées de l'extérieur, ou seulement avec le soutien et l'encouragement des bienveillants bienfaiteurs blancs. Le devoir de raconter les histoires locales des luttes de libération menées par les Noirs eux-mêmes à travers l'engagement individuel et les batailles, et le leadership local est donc une nécessité. A travers les approches critiques d'analyse du néo historicisme et du *cultural studies*, le présent article explore les petits récits locaux des Afro-Américains dans leur combat pour la liberté et pour une société égalitaire, et leur résistance à la suprématie blanche et à la cruauté déshumanisante. L'étude est menée dans le roman *L'Autobiographie de Miss Jane Pittman* d'Ernest J. Gaines et met l'accent sur l'évolution du leadership «local» noir, entre les deux genres, depuis la proclamation de

l'émancipation jusqu'au mouvement des droits civiques des années 1960, tel que cela apparaît dans le roman.

Mots-clés: Afro-américain - leadership - liberté - lutte - égalité

INTRODUCTION

Seeing the social and political changes that were emerging in America, Tocqueville believed that a “new political science” would be needed. According to him, it would be the science of democracy. He observed that over the previous decades in America, social, economic and political conditions of men were becoming more equal. He then concluded that the aristocracy was gradually disappearing as the modern world, following the ongoing social process taking place in the New World, would experience the beneficial effects of equality. But the history of black people in the USA contradicts Toqueville’s expectations.

Black history is one of disappointment. Independently from the fights they wage against oppression, the official recognition of Black people’s own control of their liberation organizations is the very threat to white people’s supremacy since these organizations could not be checked. But regardless of the political system’s resentment and rejection of the black endogenous leadership, African American political rights small scale organizations multiplied. The narrative of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (The Autobiography)* can then be looked upon as a writing back strategy meant to deconstruct the false cliché of black people indolence and pusillanimity.

In their long struggle for equality in the oppressive white-dominated system of America, their battles for equal rights and full citizenship, African Americans have garnered and coordinated their collective efforts through some leading figures who stand for and defend their interests. These leaders have always tried to articulate the aspirations of the large masses of oppressed black people and give voice to their claims. Some names such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, William Du Bois, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fall within this range of leaders who have impacted the destinies of black people in the USA.

However, opposing the oversimplification of grand narratives of great leaders, postmodernism, especially in its variant of

new historicism, has shown that these beautiful versions of “leadership narratives” fail to encapsulate the experiences and inputs of the millions of people who take part in the making of history, as these narratives neglect the local and fragmented contributions of real stakeholders. The local, fragmented small narratives of the faceless and nameless players of history is the version that Ernest Gaines offers through the protagonists of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Espousing the oral tradition in Miss Jane Pittman’s narrative, this paper adopts the interpretive frameworks of cultural studies and new historicism, and focuses on the evolution of African American local political leadership in Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

1. The Evolution of African American Leadership in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

Widespread belief mirrors the deeply frustrating account that most of the very first political movements that advocated the rights of black people in the USA were organized by white human right champions, like William Lloyd Garrison, or were operated under white patronage, as were Booker T. Washington’s Negro urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. So, only those white patrons and liberal benefactors are given the credit of enfranchising black people from the plantation life, fighting emasculation, rape and depersonalization, the merit of fighting against Jim Crow and lynch mobs, against sharecropping and chain gangs. In point of fact, black-led organizations proved to be an imperative as African Americans realized that they do not have to rely upon the leadership that the white power or benevolent white defenders of their cause put up for them.

The characters of *The Autobiography* portray various aspects of local black leadership. Before emancipation proclamation, Unc Isom on the plantation is the elderly slave who assumes the highest leadership role. He is respected and listened to. It is under his leadership that the newly freed people, after emancipation, hold their first meeting, to decide on the collective action to take: whether to leave the plantation they have so far been held slaves, or stay. After their emancipation, the community of freedpeople is helpless and needs spokespersons in the defense of their interests. Unc Isom is then

a good example of the venerable thoughtful elderly person endowed with the skills of leadership. At this meeting, he does not succeed however to maintain the overall cohesion for a single collective decision. The meeting announces the cleavage in the community of former slaves: the majority shunning the dangers lying on the trek road to the North, decides to stay while a minority mostly made of young people decide to leave on the spot. The separation occurs between the hot-headed young people, and the others led by elders who think it is more expedient to remain together no matter what the outcome might be. The stance is expressed here by Unc Isom who tries to persuade young people to use caution: "Hold, this is wisdom I' m speaking from, hold now" (15). Unc Isom argues that what is past cannot be helped and that to demand a redress for past grievances is futile, as well as disowning and distancing all that belongs to their past of slavery. This is what he believes is the voice of wisdom. But the young people reject this opinion, hungry for new horizons and experiences out of their place of servitude. Jane is among them.

In his role of leadership, Unc Isom tries to convince the others to remain together but he fails. His wisdom is not enough to preserve the unity of the group. However, even though he does not succeed in his attempt to prevent the group from splitting, he demonstrates his leadership by calling for the initial meeting which is held to discuss collective issues without the guidance of White people. This deed is of deep significance because it brings out in relief the expression of African American freedom. It is clear evidence that African Americans can determine themselves without taking into account the white system which has set rules according to which they should live. Unc Isom emerges from the African American community as a leader not because he is chosen by the whole community, but due to his proven qualities known to everybody. Unc Isom (let's note by passing how his name echoes wisdom) plays the same role as Blue Jack in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In fact, Blue Jack is for the others a leader because of his knowledge of the African tradition and folktales. He is respected and listened to by all the others. Unc Isom and Blue Jack, in the scope of the two narratives, epitomize the African wisdom elders speak with, though this wisdom is, sometimes, confronted with the

new generation's enthusiasm and desire for change and thus, seems not enough to solve all the community's problems.

Apart from the wisdom and intelligence required for leadership, another determining feature of leadership, present in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, is courage. Being courageous for African American leaders means confronting the system and fighting back the white system without without fear. African American known leaders, from Gabriel Prosser to Denmark Vesey, from Nat Turner to Sojourner Truth, from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, were characterized by their strong determination and willingness to die as heroes for the advancement of their communities and for the dignity and pride of the black community.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Big Laura's leadership, when she dies, is taken over by Laura. When the little band which is a burden to her gets in the swamps, they stop to sleep as it is night. That night, Big Laura makes a fire in the dark swamps with an iron and a flint, and gathers all the others around her. Big Laura symbolizes the original African American mother whose courage and determination transfuse blood-strength into her group. However, alone, she is not strong enough to face the guns of the patrollers. She is however the first case of leadership figure presented in the novel who decides to challenge wild nature and lead her little band of followers to a better place. Big Laura's leadership figure shatters the female cliché of weakness and love for safety and comfort.

After Big Laura, Joe Pittman also emerges as a lead figure. Jane meets him and they get married. She moves with him from Louisiana to a place near the Texan border where he takes a job, breaking wild stallions. Joe first confronts his dishonest master who, seeing his horse-breaking skills as a precious asset, first sets a high price for his freedom. He also tricks him on the amount he first sets. But Joe, adamantly, clings to freedom and pays his own purchase price. Jane sees her husband's occupation of breaking horses as a dangerous work and wants him to stop. But Joe refuses, arguing that every man signs a contract when he is born, accepting death as the basic condition of life; and if his life and his death are to have any substantial meaning, he must spend his life doing his job the best way possible. A wild stallion Jane sees in her ominous nightmares runs

away and Joe dies in an attempt to recapture it. In doing so, Joe fulfills his potential. The significance of Joe Pittman's leadership lies more in his idiosyncratic expression of manhood and the way he conceives of and lives his life than on his social accomplishments in the lives of the community. Joe Pittman, as he purchases himself out of slavery, makes sense of his own life by breaking horses. Breaking horses may be viewed as the expression of his own will on his environment, on horses. Breaking horses gives him his feeling of manhood and frees his will thwarted by social constraints. He has the feeling that he can exercise control, up to a certain extent, on his immediate environment. That is why he does not listen to the ominous warning of his wife and stoically, lives up to his own dreams, marching head on to meet death. He dies in freedom, with dignity, respected by both white and black people.

It is to be underlined that at a time when most black men are reduced to farm work, breaking horses is a rare skill that makes Joe stand out, all the more so as he is known to be an exceptionally gifted horse breaker. Joe sets an example of free will, social mobility and independence. His own conception of empowerment and leadership gives a particular insight into Booker T. Washington's philosophy of the priority of the search for economic power in post-slavery America. Washington urged African Americans to work as skilled artisans to prove their sociability and gain freedom gradually. Through Joe, African Americans are offered an illustration of personal accomplishment through sheer will. Joe Pittman, apart from the independence his occupation offers, is economically better off than most of his black neighbors. He puts himself up as a black person who can do great and practical things, and who is able to defy white people's imposed limitations. Booker T Washington believed that if African Americans gained an economic foothold, then civil rights and social equality would logically ensue. As a matter of fact, Joe Pittman is treated with respect, in a way perceptibly better than the consideration given to farm workers. His skills raise him above the commonplace menial black occupations of farmers, domestic servants, and manual laborers that leave room for only one answer from the requests addressed by white people: "Yes, sir/madam."

Ned, Jane's adoptive child, rises into leadership after Joe and epitomizes the full commitment and sense martyrdom the first generation of post-slavery black leadership stood for. Ned becomes a leader through the fight that he undertakes against white oppression. He joins a committee organized by African American soldiers, and in the image of Sojourner Truth, provide them with assistance in their trips to the north. His role consists in helping people to leave for Kansas by organizing relays, providing food, accommodation and little financial help when needed. It is the beginning of Ned's trouble with the political administration of the South. White racists carefully plan to kill him. Ned comes back to Louisiana after his marriage, purchases a plot of land and sets up the first school to educate black children. This gives rise to widespread anger among white people. Colonel Dye, one of the old masters of the South warns Jane to make Ned stop his job, but Ned refuses, saying that he is doing what he thinks is right. For this reason, he is murdered in an ambush set up by Cluveau. Like Joe Pitman, Ned Douglass dies with dignity. Representing the radical commitment in the dawn of freedom in Black America, those two figures can, but face death. The stoicism with which they face their destiny, refusing to yield although they know but too well that their lives are at a risk, is what elevates them to the ranks of martyrs. Both Joe Pittman and Ned are warned about the danger facing them. But they prefer dying in dignity than relinquishing their dreams and living in cowardice.

In front of the white repressive power, it is necessary to have courageous leaders from the African American community to resist oppression. Contrary to the great figures of leadership hardly accessible to the masses, these people living in the small communities of those whose lives they impact, set up an accessible and imitable role model. They insufflate courage and determination to their people on a daily basis. Joe's and Ned's courage represent not only the refusal of white social domination, but also the challenge of resistance against American oppressive political forces. In addition to the support and the courage that African American leaders should have, they have also had to be smart, dodge and sidestep pointed arrows and backstabbing. This is one of the implicit but most central meanings embedded in the philosophy of "signifyin'" expressed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Finding

the sufficient escape space between the denotative and the connotative, the said and the implied, is often, vital for these leaders whose lives are at stake every second. From the old plantations to the current US society, they have always known how to make smart moves in order to resist and cope with the white discriminatory and oppressive rule. In face of oppression, the “cunning” of signifyin’ turns out to be one of the tools of the oppressed for the negotiation of survival. Some great figures of African American history such as Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X, to cite but a few, are grounded proofs of how smart African Americans leaders had to be. Washington used a double language to levy funds for his works and in the same time secretly fund his officious projects for equality, while Malcolm X was well-versed in the use of the power of the word, which he has always wielded as a weapon. And the power of the word is what Ned intends to teach his school children.

Ned, as a leader, tackles two sensitive chapters of the lives of African Americans really conducive to empowerment: political organization and education. Ned is mostly seen as a threat by the white community because he creates a school and starts to educate black children. As an organizer, he holds a meeting to sensitize African Americans and encourage them not to fear the white repressive system. He tells them about the real meaning and importance of “union” and “organization” within the African American community. For him, African Americans should stand together in order to be strong. It is only when they are united that they can get the necessary power to resist white oppression.

That is the message he delivers on his mesmerizing speech which bears the scent of the sermon on the mountain. The speech tolls the bell for his death. Ned, in his speech, insists on the importance of equality and freedom in a democratic country. He reminds his people that equality and freedom are two things that would never be handed to them on a silver platter. These things will not come as an act of charity or as an act of good will. They must have the strength to take them and by the very act of taking them, they would achieve personal dignity, self-respect and pride in color. For this reason, he asks black people this question: “wouldn’t you rather die saying I’m a man to die saying I’m a contented slave...?”(Gaines 111). Ned is talking here

about dignity, for when powerless people begin to demand power and self-determination; they generate within themselves a real sense of dignity that demands respect. This is the reason why Ned does not want his people to remain only in one corner, but to fight at all the corners of the society. As he induces his children to fight every facet of the society, one of them asks him why he teaches them to listen to Booker T. Washington, since the latter had advised his people not to aggressively out their request of civil rights and to soft-pedal their quest for immediate social equality. Ned replies that he agrees with Booker T. Washington on that very point. He adds however that economic power is meaningless without freedom and equality. Political power, he argues, is the first step to independence and freedom. Freedom then means that African Americans should turn their backs on even the most benevolent paternalism and make their own way. Only then, would they be a self-determining people. To accomplish this, African Americans should participate in the decision-making process as he relates to them. The long struggle led by African Americans against the white repressive system has resulted in the collapse of the old system of the segregated public facilities in the South and engineered the most important breakthrough in equal-rights legislations for African Americans one century after the American civil war.

Ned also believes that black people, instead of removing to new places, should build their own communities and make them desirable places to live, work, play and send their children to school. This means encouraging people to remain in their communities and helping them improve their living conditions. To achieve these goals, African Americans should acquire power. They should not be afraid of the power and should see it, use it, because a community organization to operate on a base of power should be oriented toward action. A strong community organization, run by the people and for the people should have the trust of the people. It should be a community organization whose end was to improve living conditions and not mere talk. It should also be a strong organization in which people would find their own dignity because the organization will not beg, but will negotiate with the white power on equal footstep. Ned, in his most bold and moving address, describes an organized

structure based on the self-determining powers of the people, a structure which is able to confront the system of oppressive powers, to face the conflicts that will inevitably follow. The speech was not just too bold, out of place in this rural place in the Deep South, and too daring for the time. All the community, including his family, knows that Ned is marked for death and his execution is just a matter of time.

Although the passage in 1964 and 1965 of major civil rights legislation was a victory for the movement, by then militant African American activists had begun to set as target for their freedom movements not only civil rights reforms but instead, the confrontation of the enduring economic, political and cultural consequences of past racial oppression. Jimmy Aaron is the fictional figure that represents these death-marked lead figures of the 1960s' civil rights movements: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. After Ned's death, Jimmy Aaron drives home the importance of Joe and Ned's martyrdoms. He returns to his native country around Bayonne as the point man for a civil rights organization. Jimmy, seeing the importance of organization in Alabama, comes to Bayonne in order to incite his people to organize, because it is through organizations that they can get power to enter into the mainstream. Jimmy wants his people to organize for their rights, to organize to reject exploitation and white paternalism in black organizations. Only then, would they be powerful enough to claim a rightful place in American life. But African Americans on the plantation are frightened and angered by Jimmy's defiant intentions. Jimmy manages to win many of them over, convincing them to march in a demonstration he would plan for execution in Bayonne. But many of them, like Elder Banks and Just Thomas, see in this demonstration a real threat to their social situation.

They fear Robert Samson, the landlord's eviction from their shacks and termination of work contracts. One sees, from Robert Samson's attitude that he is one of the last of a long line of white southerners who had maintained an inflexible resistance to change and growth. Just as southern whites fought for the re-establishment of a white supremacist rule after the civil war, so did they fight for its perpetuation in the face of a growing civil rights movements. Just like

colonel Dye who takes over the Bone plantation on which Jane works at the end of the Reconstruction Period, Robert Samson orders the freedpeople working and living on his plantation either to accept the return of the old order or to leave. He tells his black workers that he will throw anyone out of the shacks they occupy on the Samson land if they participate in the Bayonne demonstration. This reminds of the panics and retaliations white planters organized to quell and stifle black protests. Even some liberals were hinted to be jealous of relinquishing the power they held in providing patronage to African Americans' liberation movements for centuries. History shows that African Americans could not rely on the moral integrity of organized white society to give power to African Americans voluntarily.

2. Masculinity, Resistance and Leadership in *The Autobiography*

Even though the title of Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography* does not immediately suggest a focus on African American masculinity, the struggle of African American males, with their attempt to shake free of their social shackles, is a central theme in the novel. Gaines explains the importance of African American males opposing oppression and asserting their right to dignity. A feature of Gaines' expression of male gender resistance to oppression inextricably conflates humanness and masculinity. That is, for Gaines, asserting one's "manhood" is the equivalent of insisting that a person's humanity be recognized. Commenting on African American men's status in an interview Gaines declares:

In this country the black man has been pushed into the position where he is not supposed to be a man. This is one of the things that the white man has tried to deny the black ever since he brought him here in chains....My heroes just try to be men; but because the white man has tried everything from the time of slavery to deny the black this chance, his attempts to be a man will lead towards danger. (Lowe 30)

Despite this danger, the men in Gaines's novel all engage in a struggle for manhood and self-identity, and the right to be treated as the humans they are. This fight is sometimes fought physically in

Gaines's *The Autobiography*. Gaines's *The Autobiography* shows, and actually foregrounds, how African American male struggle, at least to some extent successfully, to overcome white oppression and domination, how they strive for individual as well as collective freedom.

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

African American men remained economically dependent on planters by way of sharecropping and paternalism. Joe Pittman, Jane's husband, illustrates post-slavery economics and its potential pitfalls. Joe is presented as an anomaly; in search for autonomy, he seeks a location where he will be treated more equally. Before Joe and Jane can leave their former home, he has to tell his former employer that he wants to change his occupation. Joe, who breaks horses for a living, cannot speak honestly to his employer and simply says that he is leaving for more money and better treatment. He has to pretend he is leaving to become a sharecropper: "He wouldn't dare tell the old colonel he wanted to go break horses for more money, he told him sharecropping" (Gaines 84). This sort of maneuvering shows the disparity between the former masters and their former slaves. Joe has to conceal his aspiration for financial independence, for his desire to fulfil his masculinity. He does so out of fear that he may be thought of as unappreciative.

However, Joe's desire for independence provides the impetus and mental and physical stamina needed for him and Jane to work and leave the colonel's plantation. Jane and Joe work hard for years, use all of their savings, and sell most of their belongings to pay the colonel's "interest." She recalls the pride they feel when they put up the proceeds of sales and work to leave those undesirable circumstances (Gaines 86). Jane understands Joe's longing for autonomy and backs him up. In this instance, autonomy is characterized as a masculine desire that cannot be reduced in the economic considerations of monthly earnings. When the family settles into their new home, Jane encourages Joe to acquire land for farming but he is uninterested. Joe understands that, as farmer, "He's go'n have to take orders from some white man," yet, when breaking horses, he does not "'take orders from a soul on earth'" (93). Joe is drawn to both the freedom and control he feels while breaking horses.

In Daniel Thomières' *Man's Way and Woman's Way in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the author correlates Joe's past as a slave to his devotion to breaking horses. Joe's occupation serves as a recapture and active subversion of the master/slave dichotomy: "When [Joe] breaks a horse, [...] he symbolically plays the role of slave owner or of the overseer" (Thomières 227). Though symbolic, these roles manifest in a tangible way that affects Joe's ability to understand the actuality of his situation. Specifically, when Joe receives the title "Chief Breaker" and the nickname "Chief Pittman" the master/slave dynamic becomes a reality, particularly in Joe's own mind (Gaines 93). He reasons that the moniker "chief" is a product of his superior skill and also refers to the fact that his expertise is not honed or directed by anyone else. Joe is finally in charge of his own person, a feat that would not have materialized had he remained in Colonel Dye's care.

It is nonetheless true that Joe's autonomous state, although fulfilling, is mostly superficial. He remains in a socioeconomic arrangement wherein he has limited power. The actual work of breaking horses frees Joe from being infantilized and from the potential threats he could presumably encounter as a sharecropper. Still, appreciating Joe's social status and his feeling of independence and remaining oblivious of his extant somehow dependent economic circumstances would be flawed. Such a view does not account for the

tangible value placed on Joe's work, and stays short-blinded to whose pockets the profits generated by his work fall. He views breaking horses as an existential profession, but Joe's skill has a monetary value, benefitting himself but, mostly, his employer. Joe responds to Jane's request that he become a farmer by contending that "*He was too valuable to just pack up and quit*" (Gaines 93). Joe hints at a slight understanding of the economic value placed on his work, but he does not separate financial worth from his personal value. That is, Joe "has the impression that at long last he is able to assert his own personal value [...] things no longer depend on the color of his skin" (Thomières 224). The ranch resembles a sort of Eden where Joe can be his own man and where blacks and whites seemingly interact without prescriptions of race. Jane recalls that "*Everybody was happy, the white and the black*" (Gaines 94). However, racial harmony does not conceal the economically unfair relations between Clyde, the ranch owner, and Joe. It is noted that Clyde held a rodeo and people came "from all over" to "[b]et on Joe"; the ranch owner "made as much on his rodeo as he made selling the horses" (92). Not only does Clyde capitalize on Joe's skill but in the process, Joe becomes a figurative example of the horses he so prides himself on breaking. Similar to these animals, Joe's skill is harnessed and employed to make profit for someone else. Joe's value, like that of the horses, is based on his ability to generate profit for his employer. Essentially, Joe's perception of his personal worth hinges upon his financial worth to Clyde. He is only able to remain autonomous due to his horse breaking ability, yet this skill, not unlike sharecropping, still places him under authority of someone else's wealth. Thomières explains that Clyde "needs [Joe] because of his financial value as an employee and performer at rodeos" (224). Because Clyde needs Joe for financial gain, the latter is spared a life of sharecropping. This alliance, however, is not the type between Joe and Colonel Dye. Instead of land, Joe is given independence. He does not take orders from a white man, but a white man provides materials necessary for Joe's autonomy, and ironically enough, pockets the highest part of his gains. Joe's accomplishment must however be viewed in the context of his time and analyzed in the range of his possibilities. His situation does not become a problem until Jane starts having dreams presaging Joe's death. Such knowledge leads Jane to

make him the proposal of farming as an option. But Joe knows that farming would not provide him with the kind and extent of independence he needs.

Apart from Joe, *The Autobiography* puts forward Ned's performance of masculinity and elevates him so much that he becomes mythologized in community's memory at such an extent as to create, even after his death, the pegs on which the young local leaders hang their resistance ideals. Ned, as already mentioned, becomes Jane's adopted son after his mother and sister are killed by patrollers searching for recently freed African Americans travelling North (Gaines 24). Ned stresses the necessity for African Americans to unite and coordinate their efforts to deal with injustice. Resistance, according to Ned, should first confront the narrow divisive forces inside the black community itself.

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

As an evocation of Gaines' masculine ideology, Ned's departure is not a retreat from the onus he has taken as a committee member. The author makes this clear in a dialogue between Ned and Jane. They discuss whether Ned should accept certain death by remaining in the South or move North. Still, facing death threat, Ned reaffirms his will never to put an end to his fight. He tells Jane, "I'm doing what I think [is] right" (Gaines 78). Ned has to yield to Jane's desperate plea to flee. The depth of his own commitment and the resolve to ultimate sacrifice is shown in the response he gives her: "I ought to stay here and just let them kill me" (79). Ned shows that he knows the fate of men who

oppose systemic racism and also reveals the capacity to accept such a fate. Gaines states “whenever my men decide that they will be men regardless of how anyone else feels, they know that they will eventually die” (Lowe 30).

Ned’s livelihood depends on his ability to accept or oppose ill-treatment. If he chooses the former, Ned can remain within the community; the latter alternative endangers his life. While Ned considers accepting consequences of continuing committee work, Jane will not allow him to risk his life (*Autobiography* 79). She knows that if she tells Ned to leave he will follow her orders, and thus, Ned’s status as a manifestation of masculine resistance remains unchallenged. He is not viewed as absconding responsibility for the community; rather, Ned is seen as dutifully assenting to Jane’s request. However, as Gaines points out, *men* decide their own fate, and Ned’s willingness to appease Jane hints that he may not be fully prepared for risks accompanying resistance.

Departure provides the space in which Ned cultivates the independence and self-assurance required of Gaines’s ideal heroes. The necessity of this trip to the North provides Ned with the opportunity of maturation. Gaines, thereby, also “signifies” on Du Bois’s John. The trope of maturation pilgrimage is a characteristic feature of African American literature. It is the pilgrimage from which Ned, like John, emerges as a full, fearless leader. While absent, Ned transitions into the respected version of black masculinity that becomes his trademark. Jane’s admiring account of Ned’s physical stature illustrates this metamorphosis that occurs in her beloved son’s *prestance*: “He didn’t look nothing like he did when he left here for Kansas. He was a great big man now. Powerfully built: broad shoulders, thick neck” (104), while the adolescent Ned is described as a “Tall, slim, handsome black child” (76). Ned’s physical transformation juxtaposes past and present, differentiating between the boy who is unprepared for leadership and the powerfully built man whose physical capacity hints at personal competency.

Ned’s fully developed physique alludes to an overall maturation, in which he returns, not only as a physical manifestation of masculinity, but also as a new man representing the vanguard sociopolitical progress ingrained in the ideals of the place of his

pilgrimage: the North. Whereas committee work involved encouraging African Americans to leave the South, upon returning, Ned's advocacy takes a more comprehensive stance that involves African Americans asserting their right to remain *in situ* in the South and exact fair treatment.

3. Female Leadership in *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman*

Female leadership is the ability, by women, to advocate for, and invest in changes that support advancement of women and men within their societies, addressing issues of unconscious bias and enlisting the support of both women and men in developing solutions (Sweetman).

Gaines's use of a female voice to chronicle over a hundred years of African American history, is proof of his belief in female leadership. Female leadership is one of the dominant characteristics of the narrative. After Unc Isom, who shows his leadership on the plantation, Big Laura rises into leadership. She exercises her leadership on the little band which heads for the North. The little band leaves the plantation, elated by their new sense of agency and responsibility but still unused to the implied responsibilities of independence. They have no will to relinquish exercising their freedom of movement. The impetus which sustains Big Laura and her companions' decision to leave immediately and go as far as possible evidences their will to radically reverse their former condition of bondage. They have been held slaves in the South, so they want to move north. They have been restricted in their movements by their masters and confined to the plantation, so they want nothing more than leaving, and in the shortest time possible. This accounts for their refusal to make any concessions and stay. They decide to go to the North, the land of freedom where opportunities are said to abound for black people. But none of those elder leaders chooses to leave, let alone volunteers to take the lead on the road to the North. Only Big Laura does.

Men would have been expected to stand up and take the lead to face the unknown dangers that the road to liberty in the North is strewn with. Only Big Laura courageously takes the option to lead her few companions, groping her way to freedom and hope for a

better life in a new place. Laura is also known for her physical strength. On the plantation, she is said to work harder than any man. Undaunted by her two children, Ned and his little sister, and her big bundle on her head, she is in the front followed by all the others. She maintains order and discipline within the group, threatening and resorting to physical force when necessary. She draws her companions' attention to their new responsibilities which induce a change of behavior from the status of slave needing care to that of free people responsible for themselves: "You free then you go'n act like free men. If you act like you did on that plantation, turn around now and go on back to that plantation" (19). Of course, she speaks with authority and nobody in the group dare contest her authority. But more than enforcing discipline, which any brute might be able to do, the specific characteristic which qualifies her for leadership is her ability to articulate with relevance the paradigm shift inherent in the rise from bondspersons to free people. That is what, above all, makes her fill the bill of her role as a leader. Her new role of leader fits her because she can settle and prevent conflicts within the group, but above all because she has an appropriate insight into the new implications of their status, which she can share with her companions.

In the post-emancipation time when the need for leaders was crucial in the African American community, black females are called to play the central role they have always played on plantations. It is in this sense that Big Laura's role is decisive for she demonstrates that African American communities, in requesting equality, in addition to rejecting white supremacy, also opt for a complementary facet of that egalitarian society: a non-phallographic society which gives opportunity to both men and women to be the mouthpiece of their people.

After Big Laura's death, Jane also grows into a leader. In point of fact, she has always demonstrated an extreme sense of independence and autonomy, with a radical and stubborn aversion to authority. She first shows her sense of independence when she changes her name from Ticey, which she is given on the plantation, into that of Jane. The price Jane has to pay for her independence and agency expressed in her self-naming is the severe beating she gets that will, when she grows into adulthood, prevent her from bearing babies.

She starts taking responsibility for herself and for Ned at an early age at which most children's major focus is playing. She is forced into caring for Ned when the latter's mother dies. Bringing Ned up, protecting him and caring for his needs, since childhood, Jane, from age eleven, demonstrates bravado and great leadership.

She finds her sense of dignity in requesting to work for a wage in the fields instead of living on alms. This sounds funny coming from a little girl of 11 years but she lives up to her own expectations and earns the respect of her white employers as well as that of her male field companions. So she works at Mr. Bone's plantation for a wage as at eleven just as she later works in the Samson plantation when she is about fifty. She is a physically strong woman who works her whole life and maintains a lively and happy spirit despite hardship. As Jane ages, she becomes a mother figure to the entire community and bears the scars of the collective fight in her body and soul. Apart from her caused barrenness, she loses the only adoptive child and long-time companion she has always had: Ned. This loss elevates her into a Marian figure as she sacrifices her only child for the salvation of the black people. Her experience of hardship enables her to articulate the collective pain with acuteness: "I have a scar on my back I got when I was a slave. I'll carry to my grave. You got people out there with this scar on their brains, and they will carry that scar to their grave [...] The mark of fear, Jimmy, is not easily removed" (Gaines 242). Her deepest, most hurting scar, obviously, is not the physical mark but her psychological loss that can never be compensated. Her life experience evidence the two facets of taking society's whippings and stoically fighting for agency and expression of free will.

Furthermore, after Ned's death and Jane's placement on the Samson plantation, she plays an important role to many of the youths. Even the white heir to the plantation, Tee Bob Samson, looks up to her with filial affection. Jane has never been able to physically have children of her own because she is barren. Her lack of biological children makes her apt to have many adoptive children. By the very end of the story, Jimmy Aaron, "the One", who fills in the position of new messiah, specifically comes to see Jane in order see if Jane will partake in his protest. Jimmy knows that Jane is a community leader because everyone respects her. Jimmy's confidence in Jane becomes

fully proven when she actually takes the lead to march the crowd towards Bayonne and pull with her the most hesitant fellow black workers. The challenge she throws to her white community is sublimating her inflicted mark of barrenness into motherhood for the whole community, sublimating her life of black female made by the whites to be infertile into a significant existence of inspiration. Some women today find an expression of their liberty in their refusal to marry. Jane Pittman stands for the forerunner figure for this category of women. Although she lives with Joe Pittman and even takes his name, she has never succumbed to the temptation to lose her independence through marriage. She has always held her name of "Miss."

In the novel, like Martin Luther King did in Alabama in the 1960s, Jimmy also tries to plan a demonstration in Bayonne with his followers. The community chooses a little girl to make their Rosa Parks. Like Rosa Parks, the little girl also violates the white racial codes by attempting to go and drink from the whites' only water fountain. When she is arrested, the African American community of Bayonne organizes a march to protest. The day of the demonstration, Jimmy is killed by the white racists. The gathering of African Americans who start for Bayonne is the turning point of their fight. In agreeing to participate, Jane shows the profound change she has undergone. When the news of Jimmy's death comes, the gathered African Americans go through several minutes of uncertainty. Alex Strut, one of the demonstrators, steps forward, declares his intention of going into Bayonne to meet Jimmy's spirit. Jane decides to go with him. In her commitment, she bears one of the essential principles of life, continuity and survival. She joins her longevity with the intensity of the new young lead figure Alex. Probably Alex would die, just as Joe, Ned, and Jimmy. It would be in the service of the African American collective cause. Jimmy's death instead of being considered as an end is instead a major turning point in the African American history, for there are more Joes, Neds, and Jimmys.

Like the death of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, that of Jimmy's killing is perceived by others not as an end, but rather as the seed sown for the beginning of a new life.

Conclusion

Over centuries, black people have attempted to assert their humanity often facing inhumane circumstances manifest in the social conditions of slavery and racial segregation. Most African Americans throughout the United States have looked to the importance of leaders whose commitment and sincerity to the struggle for inclusion and self-determination would kindle a light of hope in a world often ravaged by various socio-economic plagues. It is in this context that African American leaders expressed the anguish of the majority with both a critical and constructive public discourse to combat the racial stereotypes. Gaines focuses on both male and female leaderships for black empowerment, relying on the oral tradition through the character Miss Jane Pittman. The relevance lying in analyzing Jane Pittman's narrative at an era when women are still grappling with social inequality, especially in leadership positions, is how pointedly it portrays the pivotal role that women played during slavery and after, in the black communities of the USA. It is this aspect of contextual re-appropriation of the narrative by the readership which the approach of new historicism emphasizes.

Gaines underlines the central role played by women in the black communities. Jane Pittman's leadership position and stance as the eyes through which all the events are narrated challenges the royal authority that males have always proclaimed to have, and have always exercised in and on the society. Actually, women greatly contribute to the survival of black communities in the USA. *The Autobiography* is a recognition and a celebration of that female contribution in the political struggle. In addition, the novel calls for the unity between male and female, a union which is indeed important for the "success" of the struggle. It also stresses cardinal values such as courage, endurance, self-respect, boldness and sacrifice, which transcend gender.

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