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Conversations with Miss Jane

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Geneviève Fabre

- 1 In his own “conversations” with interviewers, Ernest Gaines stresses the importance of talk in Black people’s lives and of orality generally in the culture. He also locates his fictional autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman in the tradition of narratives “from the mouths of ex-slaves,” rather than of texts such as Frederick Douglass’s *Autobiography*, “written by himself [italics added].” The setting and the tone are given from the start: A young history teacher records the life story of a 108-year-old woman whose existence spans more than a century. She tells her story by recollecting facts and events mostly through the memories of conversations, brief or long verbal exchanges she had, at crucial or trivial moments in her life; with a great diversity of people. In the process, she becomes the main narrator-author, weaving many threads, picking up loose ends, and structuring and controlling her narrative, thus challenging both Gaines the real author and her editor interviewer. She, the fictional character, invites them to reconsider the terms they have initially set: they must think less and less of the usual conditions under which such testimonies are collected and tape recorded and allow her to *travel* freely in a terrain she explores bodily, emotionally, mentally, and verbally, in all its historical and geographical dimensions. They must engage in conversation with her as though she were a live person. Her own words will not be answers to a preconceived series of questions, but rather the gleanings of her own roaming and wanderings. Out of distant or more recent memories, she summons up the individuals with whom she has shared a particular experience at some moments of her long existence. She does so not only to authenticate what she is saying, but to get the full visual picture—the time, season, and place, who was there, who spoke or kept silent; who were the principal actors and witnesses—, and recalls the words, voices, and sounds coming from all sides.
- 2 In an essay that deals with the relationship he developed with the character he set out to create, “Miss Jane and I,” Gaines, explaining the genesis of his book, reports on the many changes he made from his initial conception of the text—from a collection of stories to a

main narrative involving many stories that all bear some connection to the central life story, and from a *biography* of Miss Jane to a *fictional autobiography*. As Jane's voice became more and more compelling, the frame would no longer be a few students from Baton Rouge who come to interview her, or a wake after Jane's death gathering people who had known her to exchange or confront their memories; but Jane would instead live to tell her story, inviting other voices to join in, to complete information, introduce variations, other points of views, sensibilities, and temporalities. "Once the story really got moving, Miss Jane did and said pretty much what she wanted. I thought Jane could tell the story of her life much better than anyone else (617-618)." Her life thus placed at the centre of the narrative would be both its anchor and its frame, literally and metaphorically. Allowing a woman's voice to take the lead, Gaines chose to deal with this long stretch of Louisiana history and the region he grew up in—Pointe Coupée and the River Lake Plantation—from the perspective of a distinct feminine consciousness and sensibility, that of a little girl who lived through the last days of slavery when Emancipation was proclaimed and through Civil War itself, and then of a woman who struggled through Reconstruction, The Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement. In doing so, he paid homage to the very much ignored and silenced memories of children and women as historical actors during those years, and to the history of Southern Louisiana itself, an often neglected part of the South. Simultaneously he was honouring women whom he loved and respected and who protected him, and a land that he left in his adolescence but would always consider as his "home." Discreetly weaving some of his memories with Jane's, playing with the idea of an interaction between him as writer and Jane as both character and author of her own story, and with the relation that he was trying to develop between interviewer, the reader and Jane, he saw his book more and more as structured around "conversations" that span several decades and as folk history that would go far back into the past, in a constant intersection of her own singular life and that of her people with major events in American history.

- 3 "I come from a long line of storytellers," Gaines has said, and he often wondered "what in the world would these people talk about?" Intrigued by this propensity for talk, he became an accomplished listener, attentive to what "Jane and folks like her had to say" and to the way they said it. Dissatisfied with what he found in history books—"much of it was unreal and untrue to my own experience"—he decided that truth to him was "what people like Jane remember (614-615)."
- 4 Watch and listen then talk and walk. This could well be the motto Jane chose to live by at an early age when she started out for her first long journey in search of a freer world. As a slave child in the house where she works in the war years, Jane is already a well trained observer and listener. Invisible—"they did not even care what I was, they did not even see little old black me"—and "silenced," told by her mistress to "watch your tongue" and that she is "not part of the history," her mouth numb after cruel beatings (4-11), she watches and registers what she sees and hears: the comings and goings of soldiers and officers riding through the yard. A brief exchange with a Yankee, Mr Brown, suddenly breaks her free from injunctions and constraints, sends her on the road in a first leap toward freedom. She dares to speak to a stranger and engages in "one to one" conversation; she gives up her slave name for that of Jane Brown, refuses to stay in the place where she was held a slave, challenges her mistress and driver at the risk of receiving physical public punishment and of being sent to the field to face harder work and constant chastisement. Yet she will not be intimidated by threat or authority. She places all her hopes for a

better future on three magic words: Mr “Brown,” the officer from Ohio whose kindness will save her; the “Yankees,” those who brought the news of emancipation and of a better future; and the “North,” the direction to follow after this baptism into a new life. Thus her first step into history. From then on, these three words will be the matter of many talks and walks, conversations and much questioning, and the cause of many wanderings. She may be “nothing but a child” for the soldiers—who in her eyes are also but children playing a dangerous game—an impudent slave for her masters, and an unruly and reckless child for the people in the quarters, but when freedom comes, “with bells ringing and ringing,” she, the orphan girl, decides to take her fate in hand and “steal away” in spite of the warnings of the elders (10).

- 5 Several conversations before leaving mark her farewell to the world she is determined to quit. She refuses the deal her master offers to his newly-freed slaves, and she has a violent confrontation with the Black driver who knocks her to the ground for daring to retort to his injunction “Shut up, you ain’t nothing but trouble.” “If I ain’t nothing you ain’t nothing but Nothing (11).” In the quarters she takes no heed of the wise old Black man’s (Unc Isom’s) advice nor of his picture of the dangers they will meet on the road, nor of many more beatings to come. She sides with the younger ones who won’t be entreated to stay. She, the 11-year-old child, takes her own firm stand—“they can’t beat me no more. Them papers say I’m free, free like anybody else (13).” She listens with great attention to the argument that follows between the old man and the youth, each offering different interpretations of what “free” may mean. The old man’s words will resonate throughout her story, especially when later in her life she will, in turn, encourage younger people to stay in their community and ask them not to risk their lives in dangerous endeavours, and when she will again firmly believe in the power of the written word to insure freedom. The conversations that occur before the first decisive move, the escape, introduce an aspect of Black culture that will endure through many changes: the need to convene and talk about current events at moments of crisis, in a place—here the quarters—away from control or surveillance. Discussions often end in heated arguments and a split in the community concerning the vital question whether to stay or leave and how to “start out” for the great walk to freedom. To some, the move can only be away from the South, from the plantation where slavery existed for so long, and to head out for the North. “When the word came that we were free, we dropped everything,” ready for a long walk and a new start (13-15).
- 6 Thus Jane as a child is initiated into a brave new world, through words whose meaning she tries to grasp. She learns in the midst of the celebration of emancipation that a new battle is about to be waged, against all odds. Audacious and rebellious, with stubborn obstinacy she challenges all. She will not miss her entry into history, a history she very much insists on being a part of.
- 7 With her conversation with Mr Brown and his promise to protect her in mind, she sets out for the North, leaving a too familiar setting for an unknown world. With a new identity and a new name, Jane has to reinvent her life literally step by step, to figure out what her situation and place are in this new stage in the raging struggle between North and South, where ex-slaves fleeing their former masters are compelled to fare through a dangerous and devastated land. The little girl who was hauling water for the soldiers now looks for the North Star, “The Drinking Gourd,” to guide her, and for the moth that grows on the north side of the trees.

- 8 From here on the story falls into a pattern where talks and walks combine and alternate in great confusion, and the conjunction of time and place, history and geography sets her riddles hard to solve.
- 9 Stories of many encounters and talks are punctuated by what we may assume to be her conversations with the young interviewer, as when she relates what happened in a more straightforward narrative fashion, or sets the scene for other verbal exchanges or offers her own reflections and thoughts. The story is thus told from the perspective of different temporalities: that of a young girl living through a long series of trials and tribulations, and that of the old woman telling the story while sorting out or recreating her memories. If the conversations Jane is engaged in take her back to the past, the talks and walks are very much about the future: about the place one must leave, the space to conquer for the reconstruction of lives that have been maimed and destroyed. As we, readers, travel through the book, we witness a change of mood, tone, and sensibility, a greater control of her life and of her story, of her life through the telling, and a growing awareness of historical and geographical changes.
- 10 Jane's long walk through cotton fields, swamps and marshes, briars and rivers, re-enacts the slave fugitives' escape. Conversations are again of paramount importance. From Big Laura, who takes her and Ned, her infant son, under her protection, she learns many lessons: how to beware of patrollers, of poor white trash who are paid to capture slaves, of low-down niggers like the slow wit who wants to steal her name, how to tell friends from foes, Yankees from Secesh, whom to trust or distrust, how to travel by night and hide during the day, how to find food and shelter.
- 11 More importantly she learns also about herself: if she does not accept the assumptions of those who just treat her as a child, she must also revise her own preconceived ideas about other people, as well as about freedom and enslavement, about good and evil. Good and evil should not be thought of only in terms of North and South or Black or white. She learns that it is difficult to gauge people and situations, that the stakes of the war are more complex than they seem, that her escape may be misguided and her survival may not be in the hands of a Mr Brown. She, the too naïve and ignorant child, is instructed in the deeper processes of knowing and understanding. Her flight introduces her to history in the making and to an ever-changing space, a new physical and social landscape, where she must find her bearings.
- 12 Throughout the narrative she will also insist on other dimensions that no history book or history teacher will pay attention to—that of emotions and feelings which one has to control or at times let go, that of the body that feels the hurt and pain and must endure, and must also be alert to register signs, sights, and sounds.
- 13 After Laura's brutal death leaves her voiceless, she and Ned are left alone, two orphan children who have to fend for themselves. Jane looks for guidance and information in the conversations she overhears or engages in, hears of unknown names of places, Mississippi, Iowa, that bring much confusion in a mind that is still set on going North. Desperately seeking Mr Brown, obstinately determined to leave Luzana behind and "to head for Ohio," she rejects advice and warnings and will learn at her own expense that a thought-out plan is essential. A bundle on her head and Ned on her hip, she starts out again, hiding during the day and travelling at night, learning to cope and survive on the battlefield as the war is waged on all sides.

- 14 She is perplexed when she meets people going South, fleeing the Union soldiers, like the white lady, walking back to her plantation with a few faithful slaves. Encounter and conversation create brief moments of sympathy—a warm exchange that would not have been so intense in the usual slave-owner relationship. Both helpless and determined, Jane and the lady follow opposite itineraries and their distinct fates. Attentive to voices—“I thought I heard niggers (25)”—Jane identifies people through color, race, or social position and always speaks of the emotions a few words with strangers on the road evoke for her; she despises “niggers who are still scared of Whites and are used by them to scare free niggers:” or, meeting niggers in Yankee uniform, she decides that they are nothing but common niggers and admits that “not all colored are niggers (38).” She has nothing but contempt for the poor white trash, dreads patrollers, is awed by the sight of death: “I saw strips of cloths, buttons, sometimes a cap half buried under leaves and dust (30),” and is not afraid of expressing her fear.
- 15 She discovers through brief encounters that there are kind planters and “decent” Whites, kind and unkind niggers; she finds help or meets danger from both Whites and Blacks, finds pain and misery on all sides. Conversations are ways of testing people as well as her own determination and endurance, of assessing a situation and, from there, of finding direction in her erratic flight to freedom. They break isolation and introduce her to a great diversity of characters. They provide information, advice, or warnings that she is not always ready to follow. Though she remains obstinate in her obsession with the North, she acquires the qualities most valued in her culture: the ability to survive and cope with adversity; self-reliance and endurance; a daring and fighting spirit; retreat into silence; and the canny use of words in self-defence or assertion. She refuses offers of new kinds of servitude that would jeopardize her liberty, rejects the contempt of Union soldiers and will not be intimidated. She is grateful to the white colonel who shows her respect, to the woman (a “poor white trash” who curses and hates niggers with all her heart but offers her water), to the ferryman even if he handles her roughly, to the hunter who gives her food, to the white man Bone from whom she receives her first pay. But she has suspicions about the Yankee investigator and later the freedman “Buro.” Talks thus enable her to grasp the variety of people who compose the social landscape in these times of great upheavals; after her short experience of white/Black, slave/master relations in slavery times, she is confronted with a wider, more complex world where news of Black freedom challenge former slaves and former masters. Her conversation with the Black hunter, who seeing her and Ned exclaims “Now, don’t this just beat everything” is a sharp, rough, witty but dispiriting dialogue on their respective lives and the horrors of the war; he calls her “a little dried up thing,” tells her about her misjudgement about freedom and the North “well it ain’t coming to meet you. And I might not be there when you get there either” and about a Secesh “handiwork who after hanging a nigger had gashed out his entrails.” But Jane still enjoys the opportunity to talk: “We were there, talking and talking. Both of us was glad we had somebody to talk to (44-45).”
- 16 She is immersed in the physicality of her new experience not only because she must fight for her survival but also because she is overwhelmed by sensations and emotions and moved by her encounters with strange people and her contact with nature. Ambivalent about her interlocutors, she doesn’t know what to make of their conversations, whether she should trust their words or her own feelings, whether she will meet help or face new dangers. Walking through fields and battlefields, she doesn’t know what nature will offer, soothing sights and respite from arduous walk, or more traps and obstacles. The mood

here is also that of folk wisdom against adversity and that of the many spirituals and freedom songs fugitives recreated during and after their escape. More and more her singular odyssey with Ned becomes part of a collective experience where hope and courage can be sustained through cultural expression in words. In her telling many expressions recur like the burden in a song or a blues note.

- 17 Jane moves between the immediacy of the flight, the need to walk on, make quick practical decisions, and the impulse to find some meaning amidst chaos and devastation, or relief from constant struggle. The conversation with the man with the map provides precisely that—comic relief and insight into the confusion. His ad absurdum demonstration is a clever listing of possibilities and hypotheses, with his crafty use of “might” and “or,” as an answer to her ambivalent feelings regarding the identity of her interlocutors: his way of addressing the usual dilemma as to whom and what to trust, or which direction to go, are implicit and witty answers to the many questions that haunt her. His long speech pictures what would happen if Jane keeps on looking for a mythic Mr Brown and a problematic Ohio. His humorous lesson in geography, his long harangue, map in hand, reaches out to many other questions. It proves as necessary as the food and shelter others offer. While it severely criticizes her meanderings, it offers guidance on the path to follow: if she learns to find her bearings, she will have a better estimation of the kind of history she is enmeshed in. However, Jane will again take no advice (“I ain’t going through nobody Mi’sippi (49)”) and is not ready to give up the dream and hope. She “starts out” again” sticking to the bushes.”(52)
- 18 It is a poor white, Job, whose crazy woman has but contempt for “no count niggers,” who tells them that they are still in the middle of Louisiana. Job, who feeds and helps niggers secretly, takes them to the back door of a Big White House and to a white man, Mr Bone, the owner, “a big man with a red beard and blue eyes ... and biggest pairs of hands I’d ever seen.” Attentive to place and person, Jane likes to set the scene very precisely and to sketch portraits, physical and moral, even before any words are pronounced. She will not let the big man impress her and, with a sharp sense of repartee, she lets him know that she won’t take any child talk. What she wants is respect. Her answers to his questions are prompt and to the point. “If we was ready to die we would have been dead long before we got here,” or “I might be little and spare, but I can do any work the others do,” or again to the question about Ned, “that one there aint weaned yet,” and his “rocks,” she answers bluntly: “rocks, Secesh killed his mama, tha’ts what is left.” Through Bone she hears of the Freedmen Bureau, of the new regime for Black workers, signs her first work contract as a field worker to clear off the land, without making any further comment on a system that allows child labor. She observes the coming and going of soldiers, Black and white, Yankees and Secesh, listens to disputes and arguments, between Republicans and Democrats, sees a Black democrat at work, hears about the trouble caused by secret organizations like the Klan (54-61).
- 19 The pace and mood are different as Jane walks through this unfamiliar terrain. The time is Reconstruction, a fit metaphor, an era that promises hope for an immediate future and calls for action. Yet safety is still an issue, and freedom still a liability. The scene is ironically the South, the very place she tried to escape from and where she has inadvertently returned. In her native Luzana, change will be slower to come and the emancipation of former slaves will not be taken for granted. The extent of rights and freedom they will be given will be limited by the inefficiency of the Freedom Bureau, the enduring attachment of the former plantocracy to their privileges and to the codes and

values that sustained the institution of slavery, and most of all by the fierce and murderous opposition of the Klan. It is against this background of political debates and rallies that the battle for freedom is pictured as it affects Jane's journey and involves her in many talks and arguments on means and ends on how to lead the fight for land, job, education, and civil rights.

- 20 Change however comes suddenly with the end of Reconstruction, when Mr Bone announces himself that he doesn't "own the place no more, the Secesh do." Talks take over the scene, vividly recorded by Jane. She tells how news reached the people at Bone's House or among field workers at great speed; pressing questions are raised to Bone: who owns the land, what are soldiers or politicians for, what was the war for? "We asked, he answered." Talks follow the same usual pattern every time a sudden event foretells new threats: information is sought, and the ever-recurring question is again whether to stay or leave. A place is then set for consultation among colored people. While many choose to leave, for the first time Jane decides to stay behind and "will not be moved." When she meets the new owner, "a tall slim narrow face man," a Secesh, Colonel Dye, a new page is turned in the history of the South: the Yankee troops and the "Freedom Beero" disappear, Yankee money is coming not for ex-slaves but to help the South back on its feet. "It was slavery again," Jane sums it all in very few words and no comment. Yet her straightforward account tells much about the irony of the fate of slaves after the long walk they took to find a new life and status, only to be sent again to a new exodus or to be "left to root hog or die" to meet Rednecks and be employed by Southern Scalawags (65-70).
- 21 The story is also told on another level, that of intimate feelings and emotions, of new commitments and repeated betrayals, in tales of love and death. If Reconstruction is over—Bone's demise is the direct result of the 1877 Compromise—those who stay in the South need to reconstruct their lives, reinvent their future. Jane journeys back to her roots and culture in her search for private and public space, and for freedom of body and mind for both herself and Ned. Conversations therefore serve to establish even deeper relationships with Ned as their story develops more and more into a mother-son relationship. They are bound by many secrets, such as his attachment to the two objects he carried along with him during their wanderings—the flint and iron that he called "the rocks"—, his only belongings that intrigued so many interlocutors. She respected his fancy, his desire to anchor the memory he wished to keep of a brutal past. She will herself be attentive not only to practical details for their immediate future, but also to whims, desire, and emotions. Her dream is to build a family and a home, first in Bone's place, a dream she will pursue through many years, against all odds and reversals of fortune.
- 22 It is while listening to Ned read for her in public on a special "Teacher's Day" in the quarters, that she discovers her real ties to him. "I knowed it if it was not for me Ned wouldn't be here now. And I felt like I had born him out of my own body (66)." It is interesting to note that it is in the narrative parts, without any direct or indirect dialogue, that she reflects upon events and speaks about herself, her deepest emotions, or occasionally indulges into more philosophical thoughts, the course of history and what it has in store for colored people. It is in these moments also, as is attested by the words "I felt" that she indulges in more intimate discourse with the interviewer.
- 23 At this point of the autobiography, she and Ned haven't parted yet and she cannot conceive of a future without him. It is with him that she engages in animated talks about the next step to take in their common journey, and the blessings and setbacks of

Reconstruction, what to do next. Ned takes a new job and joins a committee, and is still the favored interlocutor. “I made him talk (73).” Jane learns from him what is happening nearby and in the wider world, while she watches intently for any sign of danger for his life. They admit disagreement and welcome convergence. Ned thinks there is little future for Black people in the South and wishes to participate more actively in politics. He changes his name from Ned Brown to Frederick Douglass, thus showing the scope of his ambition as leader, a young man of thought and action, in total dedication to his people and to the cause of freedom and the new social gospel. His activities soon attract the attention of the “riders.” He and Jane know that he will only save his life by leaving; he entreats her to follow him. Once more she decides to stay. “This is not my time,” and, “I think you ought to go. But not me (75).” Their paths split. Speaking against her own desire, Jane experiences one of her most heartrending leave-takings, “God knows I did not want him to go,” expressed in a tense short sentence, as when she translates emotions through what she feels “deep inside” her body. “When he got up to go, my heart jumped in my chest.” (In a similar vein as when Mr Brown gave her a new name, she found it so pretty: “I stood there grinning, rubbing my foot with my big toe,” 8).

- 24 If Reconstruction marked a stage in her encounters with history and brought a brief moment of security and happiness—the prospect of decent work with pay for her and of education for Ned—the end of Reconstruction brings dislocations and sends them back to a too familiar pattern: the necessity to leave, start out again, take new risks and seek new opportunities, take part in another large and dangerous exodus. Disillusioned by the Yankees, Jane has no more faith in heading North—“What’s up there?” she asks (75).
- 25 Correspondence with Ned, his “letters from Kansas,” initiates her into a new mode of communication. In spite of her preference for direct conversational exchange and strong attachment to the oral tradition in her culture, she has a great fascination for the written word and the pen, is proud of Ned’s education and his familiarity with books. She remembers the time when she watched Ned read. Ned and his like belong to those who in her community have performed the important function of “readers.” Bringing assistance to those who were denied access to education, they read and wrote letters for them, a function that Gaines himself performed for his people. In these post-Reconstruction years, when so many documents—be they work contracts or new legislation, announcements, newspapers, or petitions—deal with their future, it is vital to read and write. Jane puts much pride and hope in Ned’s calling and successive jobs. She follows with great attention his moves through new land and states, at the time when many Blacks were migrating (an exodus in which Joe and Jane would also participate), and through more wars, in Cuba, then back “home.”
- 26 In many ways the stories and conversations in *The Autobiography* are about testing strategies in the march toward freedom, in a direct confrontation with history, brutal events, ruthless decisions. New openings, progress, risks and setbacks are endlessly discussed.
- 27 Jane builds with her husband Joe Pittman a different relationship. Yet her love for Joe is another daring act. The stories of Jane’s relationship to the two men, “son” and husband, are interlocked but distinct. Jane shares few conversations with Joe, who remains, as opposed to Ned the speechmaker, a man of few words, whose sayings are often reported indirectly. Yet Joe’s portrait stands out vividly as it emerges from the way Jane watches him and speaks of him. Their marriage, without the traditional broomstick and church service, binds them in a tacit contract: respect for their respective desires for

independence, a decisive move toward modernity that will find an appropriate setting in the West. History and geography combine to help negotiate a change. As for many freed slaves, the migration westward means another step toward freedom, offering hope to settle in a new life. It liberates Jane's mind from her childhood obsession to Go North and from her experience of "modern slavery" in the South. Attentive to Joe's needs and fancies, Jane testifies to her understanding of Black men's minds. Awed by his physical strength, she accepts his choice of becoming a professional horse breaker, in an ironic reversal of the way, back in slavery days, overseers "broke in" slaves.

- 28 Reciprocally, when in three short words she reveals a secret—"I am barren"—Joe does not see this as an obstacle to their union (95). The barren woman marries a man who gives her a new name, Pittman, and entrusts her with the responsibility to raise his two daughters.
- 29 Courtship and love and all the feelings and emotions involved are evoked through short exchanges. Jane and Joe create a new relation of mutual respect and understanding, trust and faith between Black men and women at a crucial historical moment, thus freeing themselves from the limits set on men and women's relations by the old slave system.
- 30 But Jane's story of her life with Joe is also one of love and death, of hope and unfulfilled dreams. It is told in two modes, heroic and tragic: that of an emerging new age—and a new stage in Jane's life—in a world full of self-inflicted violence. After leaving Colonel Dye's plantation where they experienced the rough new sharecropping system and the decadence of the declining slaveholders class, another flight and dangerous journey takes them to Clyde's place near the Luzana/Texas borderline to meet a ruthless world. There for a brief while they find in their new cabin privacy and rest, the enjoyment of being together. This is, in the conversations with Miss Jane, one of the rare moments when she allows herself to speak, indirectly and with great discretion, of courtship and love, when they contemplate the possibility to make a new start. "We was so proud we had moved, so happy for the good meal [...] every time we looked at each other we had to *grin*. Feet sore, back still hurting, but grinning like two children courting for the first time (84)."
- 31 In Clyde's House where she is about to start working, the hostility of the black servant Molly helps her define her situation at this stage of her life. Molly's devotion to her white folks, her loss of contact with people in the quarters, her deprivation of love and attachment, her anger and vulnerability set her off as an example not to follow. In contrast, Jane accepts to take from white people what she needs but will not let them threaten her independence. Compelled by necessity to live among white folks, she knows that her real life is elsewhere, among her people—there lie her real ties and bonds. As a woman she asserts her distinct status: her emancipation from the slave condition, her pride in the work she is entrusted with, and her ability to envision a future and to speak and move freely in a new interracial world.
- 32 During their ten years at Clyde's, Joe, convinced that the best thing he can do is to break in horses and sell them down the river, becomes the prototype of the first Black cowboys, a new cultural hero: "... breaking horses, I don't take orders from a soul on earth (89)," he loves danger and is not afraid of dying in a "reckless" confrontation with a fierce horse. This is in keeping with his philosophy of life and death: "Do the best you can with the little time the lord spares you (95)." As the Hoodoo woman says, "He must prove he is a man. Poor fool." Joe may be a fool, but Jane respects his fanciful attachment to horses and is haunted by a premonition of his death. Her conversation with the Hoodoo mulatto woman, a powerful figure in Black culture, confronts two sensibilities: one is shaped by

familiarity with the world of spirits, the other seeks to define the terms of a new, modern relationship between men and women. Still ambivalent about her role, her power, and the extent of freedom she must leave to the men she loves, Jane seeks advice from the Hoodoo woman who might help her with her dreams of horses that “worry her mind (91).” Her fright and fear, fear of the violence and hurt, fear of death—the man’s or the horse’s—is expressed in a blues note, like a burden in a song. The room where Madame Gautier, the Marie Laveau of the place, introduces Jane to the household is evoked in great detail. Jane always seems to be concerned to describe the setting as if to prepare for the words that follow. In the sharp dialogue between the two women—swift questions and answers mingling practical matters with philosophical considerations, long standing beliefs, and folk wisdom—death is both a riddle and a simple fact of life. Joe’s death, his getting entangled in the rope and dragged through the swamp by the stallion, comes as no surprise. Jane’s description of it is as vivid as she pictured it in her dreams. Once again feelings are expressed in very few words: “When Joe Pittman was killed a part of me went into his grave (98).”

- 33 In three lines Jane evokes the years that separate two important events in her life, the deaths of the two men she cared most for, and she tries to get the chronology straight. A brief relationship with a fisherman, Felton, took her to the St. Charles River. “Then one day Felton was gone, didn’t say a word. But that did not bother me none. Not long after, Ned showed up with his family. He came back from that war in Cuba. The war ended in 1898. He came here the next summer. A year after almost to this day, Albert Cluveau shot him down (98).”
- 34 The rapid succession of events preceding and following Ned’s death is told in several scenes through two main conversations and a sermon at the river. One describes Ned’s homecoming after long years of absence: the young thin adolescent has become an impressive, powerfully built man who has returned to set up a school by the river, to teach what he’d learned from Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. The other talk takes place ironically near the river, and it’s with Cluveau. “One day they were out fishing together.” Jane recalls many other similar days when Cluveau sat on the grass “right there side of me” talking about the people he’d killed. “But no matter how he talked I would sit there and listen to him.” She draws one of her most incisive physical and moral portraits of this strange companion: a short bowlegged Cajun, “face looked like somebody had been jobbing in it with an ice peak [...] That old felt hat, sweat-stink, torn at the top.” Sometimes when she got him off talking about killing, she made him talk about fishing and raising crops, “but in the end killing always came back. He wasn’t bragging about it, but he wasn’t sorry either. It was just conversation.” The conversation “that day,” and from that day on, was about Ned—when Cluveau frequently dropped by the house in an attempt to break the news that would kill Jane’s heart and end their friendship. “They talk ‘bout your boy there, Jane. They don’t want him to build that school there, no [...] They want me to stop him.” And finally to Jane’s question, “Can you kill my boy?” he replies, “I must do what they tell me.” The “they” and “there” are no mystery to Jane who from then on knows that, in the complex world she’s living in, friendship, love, and dedication to a cause are doomed, and “niggers” like Ned, as he himself knows well, must die. There is no room for family or community life, for feelings about kin or neighbors. There is no dream about breaking barriers of class and caste, no hope for change in a place still ruled by patrollers and their like, who turn people against one another and hire killers so as to make sure that law and order are respected. But Ned

will not be moved. He will give his last “lesson before dying” in his sermon by the river. Talks here shift to another mood, one of fervent Black speech, speech that pleads through biblical images for cultural awareness and political action. Ned’s listeners must hear about where they stand and what they should stand for, what has been taken away from them and what they are entitled to. “This earth is yours and don’t let that man out there take it from you. It’s yours because your people’s bones lays in it [...], because their sweat and blood done drenched this earth [...] Remember this: Your people’s bones and their dust make this place yours more than anything else (107).” In the sermon “that hurried him to his grave (117),” he addresses the “warriors” and encourages them to fight. The message that proclaims his faith in the possibilities of change for the South evokes the teachings in B.T. Washington’s famous exhortation in his Atlanta Address, “Cast your buckets where you are.” At the wake after Ned’s death, people come from everywhere wanting to touch his body and following the “trail of blood”—all the way from where he was shot to the house he lived in.

- 35 Thus the story of Ned’s return “home” is a dramatic, ironic one. He left to escape danger. He returns to meet his death. Ned’s assassination, which breaks bonds that will nonetheless outlive him, is for Jane, in the long series of deaths, the most violently excruciating experience. The boy she saved from many dangers “dies an unnatural death.” Ned has been a companion of her youth and childhood; she stood as his protector and guardian. Reciprocally, he was her educator for the dawning new age. Ned’s death is, as are many of the others, announced by dreams and forebodings, and also by words, pronounced in this case by the killer himself. When Jane dares confront Cluveau and declares him guilty, her words assume a more moral and legal tone. Taking action saves her from sorrow, from anger at the Cajun that shows such contempt for human life. Her words even allow for some empathy for the family of the man with whom she used to fish and converse. Meanwhile she knows she must continue the fight against injustice and violence. Neither rebel nor warrior like Ned, she will nevertheless be attentive to the mission Ned entrusted her with.
- 36 However, history will still have more lessons to teach her. On the Samson Plantation, where Jane goes in order to “move off the river,” conversations deal with issues such as the new codes that rule servant-master relations and inter- and intra-racial contacts. Changes may have occurred, mentalities have not followed. Talks bear upon her working conditions as first a field hand then a house servant, her interaction with both Whites and Blacks in the three spaces where she moves: the fields, where she gets water; the house, where white presence prevails (she nonetheless sets high value on the independence she manages to achieve); and the quarters, the privileged place for freer speech. Impressions are shared about the nature of work, the fight between rival labourers, the beating from overseers. The main event is the fight between Black Harriet, the Queen of the Field, and Katie Nelson, “a little tight-butt woman from Bayonne,” a “race” that all wanted. Other stories concern schooling, religious life and church, family and leisure, and, more intimately, marriage, love, and sex. Talks deal with the ordinary life of common people, who, as Jane says, “make the day go.” Many discussions focus on strategies for survival, vigilance, solidarity, fear of betrayal, and unjust chastisement. On a personal level, her remarks show Jane’s pride in her work. She talks about distributing food and water to those in need—two fit symbols that send her back to the childhood days when she hauled water for soldiers in the killing fields. She is more and more conscious of her role as provider who bestows material and spiritual well-being. She deeply cares for her kin and

kind, and she sees herself as perhaps having a vital role to play at this historical moment of change amidst threats, violence, and insanity.

- 37 Religion becomes a major issue. When Jane decides to “get religion (133),” the conversion—after her many baptisms, changes in name, and immersions in rivers—sets her on to new travels in closer contact with her culture. Many questions arise in her talks—whether or not God exists, whether He’s a white man’s god only, etc. She may be ambivalent or skeptical, yet she embraces belief. A non-conformist, she doesn’t feel bound by the rules of the church. She confesses that she prefers Sunday nights when one doesn’t have to go to church, and that occasionally she wouldn’t mind skipping church altogether to see Jackie Robinson play at the stadium.
- 38 Symbolically and pragmatically, she sees her conversion as another river to cross, a crossing that may open new paths on the way to freedom. Conversion may help her find a spiritual haven, relief from the constant strain of work, encourage meditation, and allow her to deal with feelings and emotions that do not get a chance to be expressed publicly. In this, her pilgrim’s progress, she seeks comfort, recollection (in the deep sense of the term), control, and strength, and she tries to assess her place in this New South where she has chosen to stay, close to her moorings. She must try to help out, here in her land and home, try to accept to move in a more modern and freer era. As a citizen of the world, Jane is not unmindful of the course of history. She doesn’t lose sight of current events. Careful watching and listening drive her to contemplate the new plantation system and the swift changes that are occurring. She witnesses the coming of outsiders as teachers—Miss Lily, Joe Hardy, and the Creole young woman Mary Agnes Le Fabre. She is insightful about their respective personalities, their successes and failures. She observes the land and its transfer to the Cajuns; the destruction of houses and the changes in the rural landscape; the reorganization and turnover of farming; the introduction of new crops; natural disaster; the high waters of 1927 that threaten destruction. She is attentive to news, local, state, and national; news of political and judicial debates, of the assassination of Huey Long; news that stirs up a variety of emotional responses and heated arguments. She becomes increasingly aware of the necessity of social justice. Overwhelmed by the constant flux around her, she sees it both as a sign of progress and evidence of more turmoil to come. She discovers a privileged place for meditation—a sturdy tree, the tree of life, a symbol of stability and endurance that has been there all these years and “knows (148).” She decides she must learn from the old tree. While she watches younger people grow and die around her, she becomes more conscious of the entanglements of history, of facts and feelings, more aware of how things can get out of step and lead men astray.
- 39 When all conversations converge on the Agnes Tee Bob story, the Samson house becomes for Jane an appropriate terrain for the observation of the intricacies of the color caste system which still prevails despite the claims that an attempt at reorganizing race and class interaction is underway. The story—whose various episodes unfold through four chapters—could well be called “a Louisiana Tragedy.” In her evocation of her conversations, Jane has often mentioned her own encounters with Whites and Blacks. She has met “kind” and “decent,” unkind and hostile people among Blacks and Whites alike. She has set much hope on a white man, ironically called Mister Brown, has had violent altercations with ‘niggers,’ has been successively helped and betrayed, respected and despised by both Blacks and Whites. She has felt sympathy for some masters as well as for poor white trash; hatred for those through whom she suffered physically or morally, be they owners or Black overseers; and gratitude for those in whom she found the virtues

she admires most, integrity and courage, regardless of color. In her new life she is confronted with new types: the Cajuns for whom she has ambivalent, often merciless feelings and harsh words and the mixed bloods with whom she often sympathizes (like Timmy, the son of an arrogant white father). Jane met Tee Bob when as a boy once in a field he helped her with her sack. She has sometimes felt special bonds with members of the white families she lived with. Yet she learned early in life to abide by the rules of race relations. Opportunities for increasing interaction between races will not change deeply entrenched habits and mentalities.

- 40 The tragic tale of impossible love between the young school teacher and the son of Robert Samson not only confronts father and son—a situation Gaines often deals with in his work, particularly in *In My Father's House*—but also involves the whole community, creating a split among those who stick to the rules, those who would rather do away with them, and those who remain ambivalent. The two main protagonists fall victims to their own inability to stick to their own convictions, to make a clear choice between reasons dictated by the society and their own feelings, between denial and acceptance of the old codes; they are victims also of those around them who fail to help or to reach some understanding that may prevent disaster. As Jules Raynard says, “We all did.” The situation is explored through many conversations and from a multiplicity of voices, and angles that are either speculative or “gospel true.” Through many reports, words overheard or told, that circulate in many tellings and versions, through her own direct conversations with the principal actors or witnesses, Jane tries to assemble all the threads that may lead to a complete or partial reconstruction of the whole story. It is through her consciousness and sensibility that the dismal tale is told by many interlocutors with a profusion of facts and comments and speculations, with passion and with fright as to what the outcome may be. Jane orchestrates it all and restores the long debate as it occurred, with a sense both of immediacy and urgency. The questions are, as is often the case, strategic: they bear upon who knows and who does not, what should be told and what should not, and, if yes, how and when. Who is responsible? What to make of rumors, of suspicion of rape, murder, and suicide? Anxious to get “the true story,” Jane has already learned that the truth is not to be found in speculations or in official reports. What she detects in the talks she hears are questions about honor, certitude and doubt, right and wrong. The interrogations also involve a whole range of contradictory emotions and feelings. It is one of the rare moments in the book when sex and interracial love are discussed, openly and crudely. It definitely is also a story about color, race, and caste in Southern society, one that, beyond the usual American dialectic of Black versus White and “the faces of power” in slave and owner relations, concerns a distinctive aspect of Louisiana history and culture. Here color takes on a more complex meaning than is usually assumed. “Free people of color” who managed to wield some power in Louisiana society found themselves, in a biracial system, neither Black nor white. Mary Agnes may well be a talented schoolteacher, but as far as love relations are concerned, there is no escaping from a past of codified race prejudices. She refuses Tee Bob’s offer to simply ignore the social order, for she is clear-sighted enough to know that their love will never be accepted. And she will neither try to “pass” for white, nor go back to her Creole heritage—nor, for that matter, be satisfied with the sexual role assigned to mulatto women.
- 41 The crucial scene takes place, as Jane does not fail to recall, in the Samson House library, with its many books, broken mirror, and portraits of ancestors—a fitting setting for Tee

Bob's desperate act. Jane, who genuinely cares, knows she doesn't have the authority to meddle in white people's lives. She has difficulty figuring out where she fits in. "Who was Jane Pittman to tell Robert Samson junior what he ought to do, when anytime he wanted he could tell me to shut up my black mouth (164)." The past cannot be done away with so easily, and the old assumptions and presumptions still prevail in many minds. In the Samson house, in spite of her determination to be free, Jane, haunted by the days when she was told not to speak, has not yet won the right to express her feelings or even, least of all, to voice her opinion. She is left with a partial sense of failure and helplessness. Allowing the past to rule her life for a brief moment, she has not been able to liberate others, and seems to have lost faith in her self-appointed mission to bring on a better future. Yet she managed to do in her own "black" life what the son belonging to the old slave owners' class failed himself to realize. In sharp contrast to the Tee Bob/Mary Agnes drama, the marriage of Jane and Joe Pittman heralded freer relations between Black men and Black women. They managed to define marriage, love, and kinship on their own terms. Through mutual obligations, they affirmed the liberty of choice, the right to develop human relations, the sanctity of family without recurring to the master's stamp or authority. They conferred the status of kin to people who were not necessarily related by blood, such as aunts and uncles, who incidentally are present in so many of Gaines's stories—they comprise the aged people, the "motherless or fatherless" child. Jane and Joe organized as best they could their domestic and private life while struggling to maintain its intimacy, integrity, and legitimacy in a more public space.

- 42 "Every time a child is born." The Jimmy story is told in biblical style. It is also the story of the quarters, at a moment when deep seated beliefs, whims, and wishes can either wreak havoc on the future of a collectivity or unite and save it in a common effort to move on. What is at stake is a better understanding of the real message of the "chosen one," of his words and actions. Conversations unfold on different levels. They are about the abuse of power in fashioning someone to fit collective fantasies, the estrangement that may develop, and the confusion that may reign between what people hear or think they have heard and what has been actually said, between hearing and listening; about what words can convey and what they fail to convey. On still another level, they deal implicitly with another wider question—the possible clash between or the hopeful encounter with cultural convictions and the new emerging political consciousness.
- 43 When she recalls when Jimmy first stepped into her life, Jane does so in religious and cultural terms, immediately endowing him with an exceptional fate and function. Calling him "the One," she relates this to a belief in her own culture in exceptional men, and to the practice of electing the chosen one and placing the highest hopes and promises on his achievements. Speaking both for herself and her people, she explores this ancient custom, stresses its relevance for the present, with due respect for this folk "culture and consciousness" in search for signs of a better future. Jimmy seems well equipped for the task, in these modern times full of trouble and uncertainty. He will be the savior, capable of making history and advancing the cause of freedom. Temporality changes in these conversations that center on Jimmy, as Jane keeps reaching back to distant eras for deeper meanings, and forward for a better apprehension of the present and future condition of her people. In mutual agreement, she and her community nourish the illusion of controlling the flow of events, believing in a decisive turn in the course of history. Here history and myth, biblical teachings and folklore meet.

- 44 In her own rambling thoughts under the old willow tree in Lena's gallery, Jane allows herself to wander freely from subject to subject, from her concern with what happened to the land now in the hands of Cajuns, to her strong predilection for sports and her admiration for heroes like Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson. But her own thoughts and her people's talks always return to the same subject—Jimmy, "we started watching him." The talks are less about what is actually said than about what the speakers "feel in their hearts." Throughout the Jimmy story, Jane incessantly draws the rhetorical distinction between what is told and what is felt—"We did not say it like that, we felt it more (200)," or "we watched him every move he made [...] we told him what he had heard and what he had seen. No, no, no, we never told it to him like I'm telling it to you now. We just looked at him hard. Sometimes that look can tell you more than words ever can (208)."
- 45 Eager to create a chronology of the life in the quarters in relation to events in the outside world, she remembers that Jimmy was born after Tee Bob killed himself, and that men like Robert Samson had already turned the land to the sharecroppers. She recalls the stories about high waters, people moving away, the coming of the Cajuns, tractors invading the fields, the War and the Japs, Huey Long's politics. She tells how people wondered about Jimmy's family, how Lena became his mother, how Jimmy started to read and to write letters for all, "he would write it down just like you felt it;" "they" wanted him to get religion and he did not want to preach but learned to listen to people talk when he took a job and went on the road to sell garden seeds. She talks about her "scare something was go'n to happen to him," and the secret he told her "what was gnawing in his chest," and finally his leave-taking from a community that failed to understand his real calling.
- 46 With the beginning of serious Civil Rights legislation, when Jimmy returns to bring news about what is happening all over the South, no one is ready to "seize the time" and take action. "That day," as she calls it, will nevertheless mark the beginning of the slow maturing of a secret plot between her and Jimmy to find a way to stir the Louisiana people who continue to sit and talk as though nothing was happening. In the gallery where she sits and meditates, the place where news comes and goes, she has still to figure it all out. She hears news of ruthless evictions, news of who owns houses and graveyards, news from the town of Bayonne—of white violence against "niggers" who dare come to the courthouse seeking rights and against prisoners in their cells. And still many people will not be "moved." When Jimmy, who has lost faith in God, suddenly appears in the church breaking news from Georgia and Alabama, Birmingham and Atlanta, she knows that the church will not follow him. But she is convinced that he is the Leader and is reminded of Jimmy's secret and her pledge to him. She hears more about his plan when he comes to talk to her on the gallery, although she has misgivings about the boy who accompanies him: "I have a bad habit not liking people on first sight (227)." She gives Jimmy a little speech about leaders: "people and time bring forth leaders (228)," about time and fear: "The people here ain't ready for nothing yet Jimmy, I said [...] Something is to get in the air first [...] It got to seep all through their flesh, and all through their bones. But it's not out there yet. Nothing but white hate and nigger fear. One day they must realize fear is worse than any death. When that time come they will be ready to *move* with you." She chooses to deliver her message in the manner that her adopted sons Ned and Jimmy deliver theirs, with the eloquence and oratorical skills she learned both from politicians and from the church. But she does it in a language that is also unmistakably hers—in simple terms, through body and nature imagery. She tells what she

“feels” in her flesh, the scar on her back, what she senses in the air, with her habit of looking for signs. The paralyzing effect of fright and fear on her people has been a constant concern for her. Only movement will remove the deadly mark of fear. The scar image enables her to delve into the minds of the people, to wait for the mysterious moment when that “something” (241) will seep through their flesh and bones and set them going.¹ “I have a scar on my back, I got it when I was a slave. I’ll carry it 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. Talk with them, Jimmy. Talk and talk and talk. But don’t be mad if they don’t listen [...] Many won’t even hear you.” (242) And she remembers asking: “Do you hear any rumbling? No. Things must rumble before they move.”

- 47 When she hears about that girl in Bayonne, their Rosa Parks, who has accepted to drink from the fountain, and of Jimmy’s plan to ask her, Jane, to help him by joining the march —“your mere presence will bring forth multitude”—she knows that “Now is the time.” She will go; her other mission will be to convince people to “start out” to Bayonne with her. Leaving their rural setting for the city where all the decisions regarding their future are made, where all the institutions that rule their lives are located, is a bold step. Furthermore, the courthouse and the fountain are apt sites for their protest. They fittingly reflect Jane’s life, she who set such price stock in water, and such pride in being a food and spiritual provider. The court is paradoxically both the place that held back Black access to places and rights and the institution through which new laws could now pave the way to more justice and equality.
- 48 “Things must rumble before they move.” News of her presence among the freedom riders, she the 108-year-old woman with a scar, will create the rumbling.
- 49 An expression borrowed from John Wideman, “Talk the talk and walk the walk,” which is both pun and compelling metaphor, could appropriately sum up Jane’s life experiences, her many walks and talks, her compulsion to return to her essential memories and to share them in the telling—two activities with many layers of meaning that have occupied her whole life, shaped and structured her existence.² Speaking of his book *Two Cities* and of the political group *Move*, Wideman inadvertently provides some keys to understanding why talks and walks feature so prominently in *AJP* (even if the authors and their two books bear few similarities). Wideman’s own comment on the political movement, when he speaks both as a writer and a dedicated sportsman, throws some light on the ending of Gaines’s book and on the dilemma Jane faces when she considers whether or not she should join the march. “What *The Move* is saying [says Wideman,]:” “If you are going to talk the talk, walk the walk” or “If you acted a certain way, you had to back it up physically,” and he adds, “You had to be willing, with your body—with the reality and truth of your body—to back up what you were saying.” Jane has precisely done that. Silently or vocally, she has blamed her people and sometimes herself for not daring to “move,” and for indulging in endless talks when the times demanded urgent action. If we are tempted to see her as both a major witness and a spiritual leader who heals body and mind, we are also left, in the last lines of the book, with an impressive visual image of a very old woman with her walking stick, leading crowds marching to demand the rights and freedom they have so often talked about and to protest against the wrongs they have endured for centuries. We are struck by the physicality of the act, the trust and thrust Jane puts on her body, by the impulse, the strength, and endurance that any such march requires. And Jane often speaks of the *pain* that one does not easily accept and without

which no battle can be won. Pain and hurt are the price to pay. The image sends us back to the little girl who, Ned in hand, dared defy danger, brave masters, patrollers, and soldiers in order to walk through dangerous land and battlefields.

50 From the solitary walk of the two children in the first book to the grand collective march that closes the book, through the many talks that argue about what direction to take, what strategies to follow, how to deal with the multiplicity of situations and characters encountered, many barriers have been breached and much ground covered. Leave-taking and returns, engagements and withdrawals, promises and betrayals, flashes of insight and bouts of confusion have punctuated the journey. Through it all, Jane has met her people, rediscovered the bonds that a common history has created. She has managed to imagine for herself and for her kind a different relationship to past and future—a past that must not be done away with but can be rightfully claimed, but that must not jeopardize the future, a future invented and created in a common effort to heal deep wounds and correct past errors. Jane’s unique and singular journeying through space and time gradually becomes a communal, collective experience, emblematic of the odyssey of her people. The wide ground she covered in her walks and talks—her interaction with so many types and characters that takes her far back in time and projects her in the future—has broadened and sharpened her vision, heightened her political and social consciousness. She may rightfully claim her place in history, in the century she lived through, as a “representative” Black woman, both exceptional and humble, whose will and daring encouraged others to talk that talk and walk that walk with her.

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NOTES

1. In her last talks with Jimmy, Jane will use other images: that of the black quilt one must push off the nigger's back (229) and that of the black veil (236); the latter might have been inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*.
2. "Story telling and Democracy: A Conversation with Edgar Wideman," Lisa Baker, *African American Review*, III, 2 (summer 2000) 263-272.

RÉSUMÉS

Considering the wide range of conversations in the autobiography, this essay will attempt to appraise the importance of these verbal exchanges in relation to the overall narrative structure

of the book and to the prevalent oral tradition in Louisiana culture, as both an individual and communal expression. The variety of circumstances, the setting and staging, the interlocutors, and the complex intersection of time and place, of stories and History, will be examined; in these conversations with Miss Jane many actors participate, from the interviewer-narrator, to most characters; even the reader becomes involved.

Speaking, hearing, listening, keeping silent is an elaborate ritual that performs many functions; besides conveying news or rumors, it imparts information on the times and on the life of a “representative” woman whose existence - spanning a whole century- is both singular and emblematic. Most importantly this essay will analyse the resonance of an eventful and often dramatic era on her sensibility and conversely show how her evolving sensibility informs that history and draws attention to aspects that might have passed unnoticed or be forever silenced. Jane’s desire for liberty and justice is often challenged as she faces the possibilities of life or death.

Conversations build up a complex, often contradictory, but compelling portrait: torn between silence and vehemence, between memories and the urge to meet the future, Jane summons body and mind to find her way through the maze of a fast changing world; self-willed and obstinate she claims her right to speak, to express with wit and wisdom her firm belief in the word, in the ability to express deep seated convictions and faith and a whole array of feelings and emotions.

INDEX

Mots-clés : autobiographie, Louisiane, communauté, mémoire, oralité, géographie, histoire, intimité, résistance, relations interraciales, voyage, voix

Keywords : autobiography, Louisiana, Gaines, Ernest J., community, memory, orality, conversations, portrait, endurance, geography, history, intimacy, race relations, travel, voice

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