



TRANSGRESSIVE FORMS IN GAINESIAN FICTION

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Abstract:

Anchored in black slavery, Gaines's novel has a historical and inventive feature. On the one hand, it is characterized by its rejection of the European artistic tradition and on the other hand, by its choice for deconstructive aesthetics. On the generic level, its narrative weave suffers from a normative crisis; the norms of autobiography undergo a functional and substantial alteration, giving way to ethno-biography. Thus, the black community's painful history is revitalized by a female voice. That narrative authority takes a step forward by making the impossible possible, reconstructing the African descents' past, and challenging the Whites' misrepresentation of Blacks. Symbolically, the prejudices previously held against black women are destabilized in favor of a panegyric picture, which epitomizes the latter's determination and audacity. Female characters are illustrated as an acting force opposed to colonial ethics, questioning the colonial authority not to replace it, but to undermine it with a view to establishing a new, flexible order, which offers them a reliable way out. Through that paradigmatic renewal, black females are depicted as vital interlocutors from whom the experience of altruism, freedom, and equality takes root and helps to construct justice in American society. In the novel under consideration, the use of transgressive values exemplifies the loss of the absolutist bearings of modernism to the detriment of plurality, difference, and coexistence. A further study of the features and ideological scope of that postcolonial era characterized by the subversion of tradition seems to be advantageous. Thus, the use of deconstructive criticism as a methodological tool will contribute to digging into two points, namely subverting the naming process and challenging the colonial authority.

Keywords: rupture; innovation; normative crisis; colonial ethics; transgressive values

1. Introduction

The transplantation of the black community in American society is not only the result of immigration.

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While some members of the Black Diaspora are the African adventurers' descents, various others are those of the ex-slaves. Their history is narrowly related to the transatlantic slave trade. Members of the second category are the first pure Africans to set foot on American soil. They are neither adventurers in search of upward mobility, nor explorers. They are rather deportees (African citizens arrested and held captives). As fictionalized by Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, once in America, the African captives were enslaved and employed on the Southern plantations.

As a result, they are oppressed and lose their freedom. Marshall's text confirms that cruelty as follows: "*Besides they had all that iron on 'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'rond they necks like a dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron*" (Marshall, 1983). Those chains are the symbol of the metaphor of oppression. Worse still, those Africans are reduced to commodities and auctioned off. As to Whitehead's work, it also revitalizes that historical crime in the utterances below,

"Cora's grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah as she was part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making an individual accounting difficult." (Whitehead, 2016)

In other words, the African deportees are the first victims of slavery. Deprived of their freedom, the latter served the colonists with impunity for centuries. Firmly kept in bondage, they do not have access to education. Gradually, they lose their critical faculties and blindly accept the colonists' teachings, which are full of lies, subversions, and prejudices. On the one hand, they parodize the African captives, and on the other hand, praise the colonists. The subaltern position occupied by the African captives is regarded as the achievement of the Lord's will. As to the slave status, it is not perceived as a crime, but as an exaltation of God's word.

Interrogating the white colonists' responsibility in the crimes against the Africans, Olivier Grenouilleau avows, "*one of the essential elements of the modes of legitimizing slavery consists in indicating that it would be more or less 'natural'. The idea is to make people believe that they are slaves when in fact they become slaves*"ⁱⁱ (Translation mine). Better still, the colonists appropriate the colonial ideology to dehumanize the African captives. Like the works mentioned above, Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*ⁱⁱⁱ depicts the death-defying periods of slavery in the South of America. Gaines's black characters suffer from various forms of crimes. Their sense of vindication is purposely suppressed, giving the impression that their enslavement is a natural fact. As far as the white characters are concerned, they embrace the ideology of slavery; the latter use some biblical narratives to justify that practice as being normal.

Chosen in the framework of the current study, Gaines's ethno-autobiographical work can be read as a fictional and historical book. He shrewdly provides his characters with a creative vision and historical role. By interweaving fiction and history, Gaines forms a heterogeneous

ⁱⁱ « *L'un des éléments essentiels des modes de légitimation de l'esclavage consiste à indiquer que celui-ci serait plus ou moins 'naturel'. Il s'agit de faire croire que l'on est esclave alors qu'on le devient* » (Grenouilleau, 2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ For any other references, we will use *The Autobiography*.

aesthetic whole, whose claimed unity postulates the quintessence of his literary project. To him, Blacks and Whites cannot be indefinitely antagonistic. Therefore, to put an end to such a perilous relationship, he inaugurates an aesthetic of subversion. His homodiegetic narrator and other black characters are disobedient to their Masters.

Apparently, the ideological scope of that disobedience is transcendental, for it challenges the colonial authority. To Méké Meité, *“authority is perceived as a manifestation of power, exercised by one individual over another or a group of other people”*^{iv} (Translation mine). The recurring and persistent defiance of Gaines’s black characters is exemplified in the narrative weave as a metaphor for transgression. To learn more about it, the current work proposes to examine some of the critical studies already carried out on Gaines’s novel. The purpose is to identify the aspects of his literary project, which seem less scrutinized and still need to be deciphered, furthered, or re-assessed. In *“Miss Jane and Personal Experience Narrative: Ernest Gaines’ The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman”* (1992), Marcia Gaudet accounts for the creative activity, which characterizes Gaines’s novel.

A closer look at Gaines’s eponymous character helps to disclose that Miss Jane is a fictional figure –a pure creation whose story coincides with that of some of the black females. To Gaudet, the beauty or poeticity of Gaines’s writing lies in its ability to create an *“illusion of the oral style”* (Gaudet, 1992). The recurrence of the figure of orality in the novel under consideration endorses Gaines’s attachment to oralized writing. Besides, scrutinizing the issue of literality in the article titled *“The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: Generic Twists and Trappings”* (2005), Claude Raymond shows how symbolic and advantageous Gaines’s use of the game of fictional creation is. According to Raymond’s approach,

“It also raises another major issue linked to its fictional dimension: the vexed question of its literariness. Its poetic qualities and its aesthetic dimension can be seen to derive more directly from its fictional ingredients than from its purported faithfulness to the reality of a person’s life.” (Raymond, 2005)

Plainly, the realism, which emerges through in *The Autobiography* confirms the historian’s work achieved by Gaines. In the course of his narrative, the day-to-day realities of slavery are vividly displayed. Without glossing over any of the atrocities, this novel revitalizes a distant history for the contemporary reader. Narrated by a former female slave, this novel incorporates the voices of other oppressed individuals. Thus, Raymond’s analysis establishes that the density of fiction provides Gaines’s novel with a poetic quality.

In another critical study titled *“The History of Miss Jane Pittman,”* Christopher Mulvey deciphers the trajectories of Gaines’s female characters. He focuses on their voices and deeds. According to his analysis, the black characters vehemently decry the slave system:

“Towards the end of the novel and towards the end of her life, Jane Pittman makes a long denunciation of the world of segregation” (Mulvey, 2006).

^{iv} *“L’autorité est perçue comme une manifestation du pouvoir, pratiquée par un individu sur un autre ou un ensemble d’autres personnes”* (Meité, 2009).

Mulvey compares Gaines's female characters to other historical figures whose fair and outstanding struggle helped to free the Blacks from the abyss of slavery:

"Miss Jane Pittman is one who escaped slavery; she remains in the second half of the twentieth century a living relict of the system. She, like William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and the great heroes and heroines of the slave narrative tradition, has lived life on the slave plantation, and she has escaped it." (Mulvey, 2006)

Further, Erin Michael Salius asserts that the interweaving of fiction and history is one of the innovative features of Gaines's writing. In his article entitled "A Sacred Communion: The Catholic Side of Possession in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *Two Wings to Veil My Face*," he corroborates our ideas,

*"Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is widely regarded as realist historical fiction: as one of the initial wave of contemporary slave narratives that challenged traditional historiography by recovering –as accurately as possible –the voices of those who had been enslaved. Its first-person narration was so convincing, in fact, that countless readers and even a few journalists regarded the book as genuine testimony of a living source, similar to the works Progress Administration interviews of former slaves conducted in the 1930s."* (Salius, 2018)

In addition to what is detailed above, Daniel Tia's article titled "Discursive Heterogeneity in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest J. Gaines" shows how biased colonial discourse is. Building upon Paul Grice's maxims, Tia points out how Gaines's slave characters transgress the biblical truth. To him, the white colonists subverted biblical discourse to justify their exactions against Blacks. To put it plainly, their disguised discourse deviates from the Christian norms, for before the Creator, human beings are equal. Any biblical teaching, which contradicts that thesis, is deviant. More significantly, Tia's work accounts for Gaines's restoring process of God's word. In other words, Gaines uses some provocative narrative techniques to demystify, dehegemonize, and decanonize the colonial ideology. In his article titled "Textbook and Fairy Tale: the Pitfalls of Didacticism in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest J. Gaines," Frédéric Dumas notes,

"The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman raises key issues in the field of the writing of the self insofar as its narrative strategies blur the boundaries between fiction, biography, and autobiography. It thus brings to the fore some of the contradictions inherent to the genre." (Dumas, 2021)

As we can see, the critical studies mentioned above are admittedly few, but substantial. Far from being a deficiency, this selection is explained by the brevity and requirements of the current study. Still, this critical review helps to delineate some of the aesthetic aspects of Gaines's literary vision. His characters' opposition to the slaveholders' injustices towards the black community is apparent through his rebellious characters. Through a deconstructive logic, his black female characters wage a persistent struggle. To them, the colonial authority no longer has

a *raison d'être*, once the law (guarantor of liberties), recalls, requires, and insists on the natural equality between human beings.

In other words, the current critical reflection aims at deciphering the textual clues, which challenge the codes of slavery and succeed in imposing the ex-slaves' dignity and integrity. Such an exercise cannot be achieved without the use of an efficient methodological tool. For that purpose, the use of the deconstructive approach will be helpful. To some of its precursors, no thought or ideology is exclusively incontrovertible or immutable. Quoting Jacques Derrida in "A Review on Deconstruction and Criticism," Xiaoli Fang confirms that thesis,

"Derrida to some extent totally changes the traditional idea of text, breaking the illusion of the totality and homogeneity of text. It doesn't mean Derrida negates the idea of text itself, he in fact makes this concept more complex and broad. Different from the idea of a closed text, Derrida's text is a differential network, a fabric of traces, always opening to outside context, other traces." (Fang, 2017)

In its philosophical sense, deconstruction rhymes with justice. Defining that concept, N'Dré Sam Beugré maintains,

"Deconstruction, being defined as 'the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible, a condition, which divides with the gift, yes, [good], decision, testimony, secret, etc.', it is then possible to assert that deconstruction is justice itself. Questions such as hospitality, responsibility, justice, gift, and promise confirm the thought of the possible (...)."v (Translation mine)

Put differently, it should be noted that decrying or portraying slavery is not enough. Practically, this can in no way contribute to the improvement of Blacks' social conditions, for through that system, the Whites set up an exclusive hierarchy, which consolidates their superiority to Blacks. From that point of view, any counter-measure working for the downfall of the slave system is regarded as an actor of justice. In *Deconstruction and Critical Theory*, Peter V. Zima writes, "Derrida also conceives his deconstruction not as destruction, but as a transgression of boundaries, a revelation of contradictions, and a dissection" (Zima, 2002). In this sense, the deconstructive approach will help us scrutinize Gaines's novel. Better still, examining Jacques Derrida's thesis, Mawazo Kavula Sikirivwa asserts,

"It is not enough to expose the way oppositions work and then stop there. We must recognize that there is always within the opposition a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms controls the other and holds the superior position. Thus, to deconstruct the opposition is first of all to overthrow the hierarchy, as 'one of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.'" It is to overturn the hierarchy by bringing low what was high." (Sikirivwa, 2020)

^vLa déconstruction, en étant définie comme 'l'expérience même de la possibilité (impossible) de l'impossible, du plus impossible, une condition qui divise avec le don, le oui, [le bien], la décision, le témoignage, le secret, etc.', il est alors possible d'affirmer que la déconstruction est la justice elle-même. Des questions telles que l'hospitalité, la responsabilité, la justice, le don, la promesse confirment la pensée du possible (Beugré, 2022)

By inscribing the current investigative exercise within a deconstructive logic, the interest is to delineate how Gaines's narrative techniques contribute to disorganizing the slave order in favor of justice and equality. To that end, two axes will be elucidated: subverting the naming process and challenging the colonial authority.

2. Subverting the Naming Process

In this section, the purpose is to scrutinize the aesthetic significance of the black characters' naming process.

Such a critical exercise requires an explanatory overview of the historical background of Gaines's creative art. The society, that is textualized here, is America. With reference to its fictional picture, the South and North are ideologically antagonistic. The former is involved in the practice of slavery whereas the latter is firmly opposed to that practice, which is regarded as being disgraceful and humiliating. However, the Southern political figures are attached to it because of its relevance in their economy. Indeed, slavery is their main source of income. The free labor provided by the slave characters is an unprecedented support for the Southern families. The hateful and erroneous words uttered by one of the slaveholders confirm the extent to which slavery helped the white community (colonists) feed the South,

"Don't put my food up," they said, "Don't it up and don't give it away. I'm go'n kill me up a few Yankees and I'm coming right on back home. Who they think they is trying to destruck us way we live? We nobles, not them. God put us here to live the way we want live, that's the Bible." (Gaines, 1971)

In terms of hierarchy, the colonists exerted a strong dominion over the slave characters. They deprive them of any notion of freedom. Financially, the slaveholders are autonomous and consider themselves as being superior to the enslaved subjects. As to the slaves, they are dispossessed of their culture and are given some pejorative names. In the text under study, one of those names is decried by Corporal Brown, a Northern soldier (Yankee) as follows, *"and I'm go'n call you something else 'sides Ticey. Ticey is a slave name, and I don't like slavery. I'm go'n call you Jane"* (Gaines, 1971). Plainly, the enslaved individuals are purposefully disconnected from their ancestral roots. The names given to them tarnish their image and deny their sense of humanity. In accordance with the above textual clue, it should be noted that the oppressed characters hold some names, which bear no cultural substance. The slave names have an ideological significance. Instead of consolidating the African descents' connection with their ancestral heritage, they rather disconnect them from their cultural past. This contributes to strengthening the superiority of the white culture. In other words, those names do not help them determine their African cultural roots.

Through them, there is the colonists' desire to demonize or animalize the African descents. In the South, where the practice of slavery persists, that naming process is regarded as a norm; no legal text is designed to punish it. Therefore, the Southern slaveholders appropriated it as they pleased. In essence, one can maintain that the ideology of slavery is accepted in the South because it is officially legalized. This is taught as an absolute truth. Accordingly, the

confined black characters have no alternative but to free themselves. That absolutism negatively influences the slaves' lives. It has some emotional and physical impacts on the enslaved subjects. Various generations grow old without experiencing freedom. They do exist physically; however, they have no cultural existence. As depicted in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*^{vi}, slavery is an *industrial machine*. It generated economic stability and offered a modern lifestyle to the colonists.

To perpetuate or propagate it, some principles are set up and the abused beings are to abide by them. Those rules are strictly respected; the enslaved characters have to show blind obedience to their Masters' orders. Any endeavors, thought-provoking or challenging the established rules are regarded as a deviationist attitude, break with the norms or act of rebellion. Thus, the culprits are systematically sanctioned. The logic is that only the Masters can think and give orders. As to the subalterns, they are to remain silent and execute the decisions received from the Masters. Their task is exclusively to carry out orders. The ensuing utterances describe the criminal feature of that social order, "*One of y'all sitting there, take that bucket and go haul that water, the first Troop said. I better do it, Master, I said. They whip me if I don't do my work*" (Gaines, 1971).

Unquestionably, the slaves are, in a sense, prisoners; they are zoologized. Worse still, the latter cannot transcend the borders of the plantations; they are obedient to their Masters. The textual clues, which follow, also exemplify our viewpoint, "*What you standing there for?*" she said. *Go fill that barrel*" (Gaines, 1971). Noticeably, the slaveholders' authoritative voice is more apparent. Here, Tacey has no choice but to carry out her Mistress's will. Some various other instances illustrate such a situation. In some cases, the Mistress adopts violent attitudes to enforce her decisions and impose her authority. For instance, Tacey's Mistress does not appreciate her response to her orders,

"My master told two of the other slaves to hold me down. One took my arms, the other my legs. My Master jeked up my dress and gived my mistress the whip and her to teach me a lesson. Every time she hit me, she asked me what I said my name was. I said Jane Brown. My Mistress got tired beating me and told my Master to beat some." (Gaines, 1971)

More importantly, slavery is practiced with thrilling ruthlessness in the South of America. Its purpose is to maintain the African descents at a subaltern position. In that geographic space, the deeds whose objective is to call for self-sufficiency are countered with disproportionate measures. In this context of extreme tension, the exploited characters settle with the names given to them by their Masters. Over time, those radical measures jeopardize the Blacks' cultural identity. In the text under investigation, the slaves' conditions are similar to those of tamed animals. Their survival as subalterns hinges on the Masters. In case of disorderliness or charge, the culprits are severely whipped or executed as substantiated in the above textual clue.

Further, the Southern universe is inhabited by two categories of individuals. On the one hand, there are the dominant subjects, symbolized by the slaveholders. On the other hand, there are the dominated ones. The former's members are white, literate, noble, wealthy, and

^{vi} For any other references, we will use *The Autobiography*.

independent. The latter's members are the African descents, poor, and illiterate. The language used by the slaves is informal. This postulates their low level of education. Examining the values constructed by a literary text, Vincent Jouve affirms, "*Language, too, is subject to a highly precise social codification. First of all, there is the grammatical norm, which draws a line between those who speak correctly and those who have not mastered the code*"^{vii} (Translation mine).

As argued by Jouve, the use of language shows how educated a subject is. In Gaines's novel, the system of slavery strictly forbids the slaves' access to education. The slaveholders' purpose was to avoid any eventual questioning of their system on plantations. To them, the slaves should neither understand nor question the institution of slavery. One of the measures taken to reinforce the obstacles is the subversion of the naming process. Indeed, the slaves are identified either by some pejorative names given to them by their owners. The passage below is representative of the cultural crime undergone by the African descents evolving in the South of America, "*my mama was killed when I was young and I had never known my daddy. He belonged to another plantation. I never did know his name*" (Gaines, 1971).

Explicitly, due to the Masters' violence and other ill-treatments, various cases of separation occur. Still worse, the subjugated beings are hidden from their biological parents; they are kept ignorant to avoid the development of any filial love. In addition to that, some Masters relentlessly sold their properties (slaves) for economic purposes. The latter are sold from one Master to another. That constant mobility discloses how heterogeneous the names provided to the subalterns are. Scrutinizing the African descents' social conditions, Rufus Ward, in his article titled "Tracing African-American history" claims,

"Before the Civil War, most African-Americans in the South were slaves and were considered property. Because they were property, their names and some information about them are given on property inventories contained in probate or estate records." (Ward, 2011)

As it turns out, the distressed subjects neither possess concrete ideas about their biological affiliation, nor their ancestral roots. For instance, names, such as Ticey, Unc Isom, Big Laura, Ned, Buck, Rufus, and quite various others are slave names. No one can deny how incongruous those names are. They cannot determine the slaves' cultural roots. In essence, they do not help to construct their cultural lineage. Sometimes, to designate the slaves, the colonists give them some generic names, such as "Niggers". In reality, those names aim at disparaging the slaves. Through them, the oppressed characters have no history. Once they are sold, their names are changed giving the impression that their history merges with that of their Masters. Through the naming process described above, one can argue that Gaines's novel revivifies one of the African descents' dark interludes.

A close analysis of that practice helps to ascertain that after the death of the slaves, all their landmarks disappear, giving the impression that they have never existed. This deliberate practice coordinated by the colonists destroyed the slaves' history. Over time, they lose all notions of their extended family. In accordance with the unilateral ideals taught by slavery, the

^{vii} "*Le langage est, lui aussi, l'objet d'une codification très précise sur le plan social. Il y a, d'abord, la norme grammaticale qui trace une frontière entre ceux qui parlent correctement et ceux qui ne maîtrisent pas le code.*" (Jouve, 2001)

slaves show full loyalty to the white executioners. In other words, the colonists promoted an era of intolerance. The slaves have no rights; they have only duties. It should be noted that slavery supplies the Southern industries and other regions with raw materials. This trade generates great fortunes through which a sort of modern life emerges in the South. That modernist era fostered particular behaviors among the Southerners. Therefore, they use all the possible means at their disposal to perpetuate slavery. For instance, the “*Ku Klux Klans*” is a radical armed faction, which shields the white colonists’ interests in the South – its members do not hesitate to kill the slaves who attempt to abscond to settle in the North. The utterances below illustrate our viewpoint,

“Then the patrollers came in on horses and mules. Patrollers was poor white trash that used to find the runaway slaves for the Masters. Them and the soldiers from the Secesh Army was the ones who made up the Ku Klux Klans later on. Even that day they had Secesh soldiers mixed in there with them.” (Gaines, 1971)

By selling the slaves from one Master to another, the latter lose their sense of brotherhood and ancestral belonging. Indeed, slavery prescribes some rules, which are considered as being absolute. Obviously, its ideology enabled the colonists to annihilate the enslaved beings’ cultural landmarks, amass great fortunes, and establish a certain economic power. However, the world could not tolerate indefinitely that extreme act of cruelty. Therefore, some countermeasures were taken to abolish slavery. In terms of deconstruction, the ideology of slavery undergoes a decline. This is symbolized in *The Autobiography* by the “*Proclamation papers*”. Those documents required the slaveholders to give up the practice of slavery and give freedom to the tyrannized beings.

Although the social scope of that news is not immediately perceived by the wretched (slave characters), its applicability or implementation is constraining for the colonists. They are to obey the law (legal authority). The voice contained in the “*Proclamation Papers*” is emancipatory. In Gaines’s novel, the “bell ringing” symbolizes the beginning of the enforcement of the antislavery policy. Initially, this does not arouse joy among the slave characters, because according to their word, “*the sun was too high in the sky for us to go in yet. But the bell went on ringing and ringing just ringing and ringing*” (Gaines, 1971). From an interpretative point of view, the echo of this ring spreads throughout the Southern territory delivering the good news. Thus, an era of change, contestation, and difference settles. To confirm it, the female narrator states,

“The driver told us the master wanted us all at the house. We didn’t ask what he wanted us for, we had no idea, we just went up there. The Master was standing on the gallery with a sheet of paper. ‘This all y’all?’ he asked. ‘All them children in the quarters, too? I want everybody here who can stand up.’ The people said this was all us. ‘All right, I got news for y’all,’ the master said. Y’all free. Proclamation papers just come to me and they say y’all free as I am. Y’all can stay and work on shares –because I can’t pay you nothing. because I ain’t got nothing myself since them Yankees went by here last time. Y’all can stay or y’all can go. If y’all stay I promise I’ll be fair as I always been with y’all.” (Gaines, 1971)

As we can see, the “*Proclamation of the Emancipation*” is a noteworthy act whose political and legal scope is binding. Indeed, it compels the slaveholders to reconsider their relationship with their victims and be openhearted (more humanistic). As far as the victims are concerned, they express their joy in varied ways. First, some decide to settle in the North. Second, others sing, “*We free, we free, we free/We free, we free, we free/We free, we free, we free, we free/Oh, Lordy, we free*” (Gaines, 1971). Put it differently, the song above is full of significance. The plethoric use of the adjective “free” preceded by the personal pronoun “we” is symbolic. In terms of aesthetic significance, that song has an inclusive value. The joy expressed here is not individual; it is rather collective and offers privileges to all the Southern slaves fostering new relationships between their executioners and them. The following instances disclose that outstanding change:

“The papers say we can go or we can stay, Master? He asked him. No, they just say y’all free, Isom, the master said. They don’t care what y’do where y’all go. I’m the one who saying y’all want. If you stay, I got to work you on shares, and you work when you want. You don’t have to work on Sundays less you want. Can go to church and stay there and sing all day if you want. You free as I am, Isom.” (Gaines, 1971)

Through the elliptical use of the song of freedom, the ex-slaves express their gratitude to the Lord. In other words, by invoking God in their song, the ex-slaves are implicitly provided with spiritual “food”. This shows that despite several years of servitude, they (ex-slaves) remain connected with their Lord and that they keep on believing in His miracle. More importantly, the “*Proclamation of Emancipation*” is regarded as a divine act. This contributes to the ex-slaves’ spiritual upliftment. Third, the ex-slaves’ joy is illustrated by their re-baptism.

To give substance or sense to their freedom, the latter decide to get rid of their slave names. The period ranging from the beginning of their enslavement to that of the emancipatory era, is an interlude of “dehumanization”. The former names bestowed on them tarnished their good image, reducing them to the state of subhumans. However, the ones, that followed the Proclamation, are that of *renaissance*, for they brought necessary hope to the ex-slaves. Thus, they struggle to consolidate the ideals of the prosperous era. Changing their slave names by some inventive ones is an integral part of the emancipatory struggle. The ensuing textual clues confirm that the slaves are willing to revolutionize their vision and acquire new social status,

“My new name Abe Washington. Don’t call me Buck no more. We must have been two dozens of us there, and now everybody started changing names like you change hats. Nobody was keeping the same name Old Master had gived them. This one would say, ‘My new name Cam Lincoln’. That one would say, ‘My new name Ace Freeman.’ Another one, ‘My new name Sherman S. Sherman.’ ‘What that S for?’ ‘My Title.’ ‘Another one would say, ‘My new name Job.’ ‘Job what?’ ‘Nigger, this ain’t slavery no more. You got to have two names. ‘Job Lincoln, then.’ ‘Nigger you ain’t no kin to me. I’m Lincoln.’ ‘I don’t care. I’m still Job Lincoln. Want fight?’ Another one would say. ‘My name Neremiah King.’ Another one standing by a tree would say, My new name Bill Moses. No more Rufus.” (Gaines, 1971)

A thorough analysis of this passage reveals that the white Masters offer only one name to their slaves. Thus, to stand out from that tradition, the ex-slaves appropriate several new names as they please. Some take names belonging to some of the famous American political figures to express their love and attachment to their political reforms. Indeed, during the time of slavery, the singularity of the names exemplifies the unilateralist, absolutist ideals promoted by the slavery ideology. As to that of the plurality, it epitomizes difference, independence, cohabitation, and emancipation, ushering the South of America into an era of grievance. Henceforth, the ex-slaves refuse to abide by the conservative Whites' requirements.

Before going ahead, it is relevant to recall that the preceding stage was devoted to the analysis of the African captives' naming process. This helped us disclose the inhuman and criminal features of that practice. As far as the next stage is concerned, it deals with the axis titled challenging the colonial authority.

3. Challenging the Colonial Authority

This second section explores the issue of the colonial authority. If we closely look at Gaines's novelistic universe, we ascertain that it embodies two communities: Blacks and Whites.

On the one hand, the former contains some slaves, while the latter is composed of white colonists. As depicted in *The Autobiography*, the Blacks' settlement in that universe is the result of the transatlantic trade. This historical fact appears in Gaines's novel through a number of narrative devices. The slave has their ancestral roots in Africa. Their presence in the South is the result of their deportation. In terms of authority, the Blacks evolved under the Whites' hegemony. For instance, the black characters are deprived of their rights and dignity. They work on their Masters' plantations without being paid. To the slaveholders, the Bible teaches that privileged positions are exclusively theirs. Yet, there is no tangible biblical reference, which proves it. This means that the practice of slavery is the will of a very small group, whose desire is to assert their superiority, using ruthlessness. As a result, the black characters remain subservient and carry out the tasks assigned to them.

At the beginning of Gaines's novel, the functions of the slave industry are apparent. Here, the slaves are to respect their Masters. The latter's will prevail over their own. One of the essential codes, guiding the relationship between the Masters and slaves is that the slaves are committed to denying their own rights to the detriment of those of the Masters. The colonial ideology established that code. It provides the colonists with full power. Such a quality is symbolic, for it is non-negotiable. The colonists jealously exerted with brutal force, without sharing it with another trend. This terror worsens the relationship between the Masters and slaves. It turns tumultuous. In this context of full domination, the slaves avoid any initiative, which can be lethal to them, i.e. they give up any emancipatory project.

A close look at the trajectories of Gaines's slave characters helps us realize that some of them grow old in slavery without experiencing freedom. Unc Isom's case is a perfect illustration. Indeed, the homodiegetic narrator considers him as the wisest of the slaves: "*He was an old man, black black, with long white hair. He could have been in his 80s, he could have been in his 90s –I have no idea how old he was*" (Gaines, 1971). Despite the solidity of the slave system, with time, the injustice towards the Blacks was perceived as a threat to the Northern authorities' vision. Thus,

they raise their voices, decrying the practice of slavery. The Northerners, whose watchword is freedom, justice, and respect for all, realize that the practice of slavery makes vulnerable their Universalist vision of equality. Indeed, by sending their soldiers (Yankees) to the South, the latter fought against the exploitation of Blacks. In essence, one can maintain that the conflict between North and South is ideological, for it compels the South to embrace the civilizational values advocated by the Northern authorities. Better still, it deconstructs the slave system. This is noticeable in the utterances below:

"I'm just a' old ordinary Yankee soldier come down here to beat them Rebs and set y'all free. You want to be free, don't you, Ticey? Yes, Master, I said. And what you go'n do when you free? He asked me. Just sleep, Master, I said. Ticey, you not the only one go'n just sleep, he said. But stop calling me master. I'm Corporal Brown. Can you say Corporal?" (Gaines, 1871)

The Yankees are the repressive *machine* of the Northern States; their role is to implement the Northerners' decisions. For instance, the latter are in the South to instore freedom and help every individual evolving in American society be free. The above conversation between Corporal Brown and Ticey exemplifies that the Yankees fight for a noble cause. In terms of appraisal, the Yankees are considered as liberating forces and the Southerners as demons, because the slave system is alienating. The advent of freedom in the South symbolizes the downfall of slavery. Aesthetically, the poetization of that historical fact shows how Gaines's creative art deconstructs the slave system. In *The Autobiography*, Corporal Brown is the first character who initiates the process of deconstruction. Indeed, he helps Ticey be aware of her status as a slave: *"Ticey is a slave name, I didn't like slavery"* (Gaines, 1971). Plainly, Corporal Brown advises Ticey to seize her own destiny. He proposes the following:

"I'm go'n call you Jane (...) I think you do like that name. Well, from now on your name is Jane. Not Ticey no more. Jane. Jane Brown. Miss Jane Brown. When you get older you can change it to what else you want. But till then your name is Jane Brown." (Gaines, 1971)

The above exchange provides Ticey with energy, which enables her to challenge all hostile forces. Despite her young age, she stands out from the other slaves. Being recalcitrant, her Mistress threatens to send her to the plantation and take another young girl who can look after her children: *"I'll put her in the field and bring another one up here to look after them children. They put me in the field when I was ten or 'leven"* (Gaines, 1971). As described in the preceding utterances, the act of challenging the colonial authority is not exclusively related to the slave adults. Even the young slaves play an essential role. Ticey is a model. From her childhood to adulthood, she remains unwavering. Indeed, she foists her vision and charisma on her detractors and fellows.

After the *"Proclamation of emancipation,"* Ticey's antagonism to the colonial authority grew steadily. She decides to settle in the Northern region, as advised by Corporal Brown. Her most fervent wish is to free herself from the bondage of slavery. Referring to Ticey's vision, the ex-Masters are used to dominating and enjoying the privileges of slavery. From that point of view, they can neither immediately give up their hegemonic position, nor belittle. Explicitly, Ticey

rejects her Master's proposal: *"If you stay, I got to work you on shares, and you work when you want"* (Gaines, 1971). The Master's promise sounds like a veiled lie. As proof, Ticey looks back on her suffering and concludes that a Master whose survival depends on the slave's labor can only repent if he is convinced that there is an emerging alternative or substitutive way out, which can effectively guarantee his food and financial security.

In case of lack of that palliative solution, he disguises himself by inventing other stratagems to divert his victim's vigilance. In other words, Ticey considers her ex-Master's cries as the symbol of their uncertainty and desire to preserve their dominating position: *"Old Mistress and young Mistress was standing in the door crying, too"* (Gaines, 1971). Obviously, Ticey considers those cries as an insult to the oppressed beings' dignity, for the latter unjustly languishes on the Southern plantations. A closer look at the ex-Masters' mocking words contributes to revealing that even a dying executioner remains dangerous. To Ticey, there is no need to be blackmailed, for what explains the ex-Mistresses' cries is that they regret their ex-victims' access to freedom. In the extract below, she openly expresses her happiness:

"Just singing and clapping, just singing and clapping. Just talking to each other, on the back. The driver he never got in the celebration him. Everybody else singing and clapping, he just standing there looking up at the master. Then he moved closer to go, where is we to go? Before the master could open his, mouth, I said: where North at? Point it. I'll shown you y'all where to go. The driver said: shut up. You ain't nothing but trouble. I ain't had nothing but trouble out you since you come in that field. If I ain't nothing, I said." (Gaines, 1971)

This quotation between The Driver and Ticey shows just how unmanageable or recalcitrant the latter is. She does not abide by any external authority. As a homodiegetic narrator, she imposes her authority on the other emerging narrative voices. That strategy subverts the slaveholders' authority. Plainly, Ticey's voice predominates and galvanizes the reluctant characters to leave the Southern plantations and go beyond the boundaries prescribed by the ex-slaveholders. Ticey is the one whose voice defies or disregards Unc Isom's authority (wise character):

"Now, I ask the question, he said. What's we to do? Slavery over, let's get moving, somebody said. Let's stay, somebody else said. See if old Master go'n act different when it's freedom. Y'all do like y'all want, I said. I'm headed North. I turned to leave, but I stopped. Which way North? Before y'all start out here heading anywhere, what y'all go'n eat? Unc Isom said. Where y'all go'n sleep? They got Yankees, I said. They got Yankees, they got Yankees, Unc Isom mocked me. I could see he didn't have a tooth in his mouth. Yankee told you your name was Jane; soon as Old Mistress start beating on you, you can't find Yankee. They can't beat me no more, I said. Them papers say I'm free like everybody else." (Gaines, 1971)

This passage unveils Ticey's defiant behavior. She is hostile and unsympathetic to all proposals urging the ex-slaves to stay on the ex-Master's plantation. To Ticey, the Blacks have suffered enough, and that it is time to reap the benefit of the era of freedom. However, the only condition to experience it is to settle in the North. In *The Autobiography*, several other characters

embrace Ticey's viewpoint. Their voices emerge alongside Ticey's one. Combined, those voices create a sort of noise in Gaines' textual universe. That polyphony consolidates and offers fierce resistance to the Guerilla Ku Klux Klans, which prevents the oppressed beings from leaving their ex-Masters. Despite the threat and abuse against the ex-slaves, the latter struggled to settle in the North and fully enjoy their freedom. Despite the massacre performed and perpetrated by the white patrollers against the ex-slaves, the survivors overcome their fears and go ahead. Gaines's homodiegetic narrator describes the bravery of another female character named Big Laura as follows:

"Then somebody in the back said, Move out the way. I looked, and that was Big Laura. She was big just like her name say, and she was tough as any man I ever seen. She could plow, chop wood, cut and load much cane as any man on the place. She had two children. One in her arms, a little girl; and she was heading Ned by the hand. Don't worry, I'll come to Ned later. Yes, Lord, I'll come to him later. But even with them two children she had the biggest bundle out there balanced on her head. Big Laura took the lead and we started walking again. Walking fast, but staying quiet. Somebody said we ought to get sticks just in care of snakes, so we all hunted for a good green stick. Now everybody had a stick but Big Laura. She leading the way with that little girl in her arms and Ned by the hand. She had found us a good clean path and it was cool under the trees, and everybody was happy." (Gaines, 1971)

In the above textual clue, what is captivating is that Big Laura emerges as the torchbearer of the struggle for freedom. All the male ex-slaves were unenthusiastic or reluctant during the period following the *"Proclamation of emancipation"*. They have nowhere to go. However, in the face of fear, Big Laura (female character) is the first to begin the walk towards the Promised Land (North). She is quite aware of the risks involved, but despite that fact, she takes the initiative; she dares to leave the borders of her boundary and slavery. The inner energy, that motivates her, is a symbol of her involvement in confronting the eventual obstacles at the cost of her life. Gaines's text shows that women are not passive beings. Even though the patriarchal ideology relegates her to the background, her inventiveness or resourcefulness remains unmistakable. Indeed, Big Laura stands up to the colonial authority. This is obvious in Unc Isom's words: *"Before y'all start out here heading anywhere, what y'all go'n eat? Unc Isom said where y'all go'n sleep? Who go'n protect you from the patrollers?"* (Gaines, 1971).

In essence, the above extract contains a certain wisdom. Unc Isom wants to avoid any eventual ill-treatment against his fellows and himself. Obvious, the ex-slaves are surprised by the declaration of emancipation. Besides, Unc Isom's words can be interpreted in another way. Indeed, this shows his passivity because the failure to take immediate action to consolidate the gains of freedom can be seen as synonymous of the Blacks' desire to persist in slavery. Aware of the danger facing all the ex-slaves, Big Laura uses her charisma to raise her voice against Unc Isom's imposture. This pragmatism, praised in Gaines' text, is the metaphor of the struggle of an oppressed woman thirsting for freedom. Indeed, only the Yankees cannot help the slaves. The latter is to embrace the ideals of the *"Proclamation of emancipation"*.

This can help them achieve the Northerners' socio-political visions, which are the abolition of slavery and access to freedom for all. In terms of defiance, Big Laura and Ticey are

some exemplary figures. They are true paragons. As in all struggles for freedom, there are always sacrifices to be made. In a sense, Big Laura is a martyr. Her death does not stop the march towards freedom. In a sense, she is a martyr. Her death galvanizes the other black characters to keep on struggling. The utterances below disclose how the death of Big Laura motivates them to strengthen their struggle for freedom:

“Then I saw Big Laura. She was laying on the ground with her baby still clutched in her arms. I made Ned stay back while I went closer. Even before I knelt down, I saw that her and the baby was both dead? I took the baby out her arms. I knowed I couldn’t bury Big Laura –I didn’t have a thing to dig with –but maybe I could bury her child. But when I looked back at Big Laura and saw how empty her arms was, I laid the little baby right back down. I didn’t cry, I couldn’t cry. I had seen so much beating and suffering; I had heard about so much cruelty in those ‘leven or twelve years of my life I hardly knowed how to cry. I went back to Ned and asked him if he wanted to go to Ohio with me. He nodded.” (Gaines, 2001)

The refusal to give in to injustice, and abide by the colonial authority, galvanizes those characters. As Vincent Jouve puts it, each character has an *“ideological marking”*^{viii} (Jouve, 2001). That of Tacey is the Blacks’ unconditional emancipation.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, let us recall that the current study aimed at accounting for Gaines’s use of transgressive forms in his novel. Such a critical analysis was successfully carried out thanks to the deconstructive approach, whose functional logic advocates the disorganization of traditional structures with a view to reorganizing them. Building upon its principles, two axes were examined: *subverting the naming process* and *challenging the colonial authority*. The analysis of a number of related textual clues helped to disclose that the rebaptism, which followed the proclamation contributed to transgressing the slave system and establishing a new social order in which the ex-oppressed beings try to define themselves by constructing their social identity. Pragmatically, Gaines’s black female characters were regarded as active figures, for they differently challenged the colonial authority. Disobedience to the white Masters’ orders after the Proclamation of emancipation was considered as a symbol of defiance. Thus, the deconstructivist approach played a relevant role in the study of the above textual clues. It established that Gaines’s novel nurtures a progressive and innovative vision. By breaking with the tradition of slavery, it fosters a new era, which helps the ex-slaves seize their own destiny.

This work is therefore a vital input; it provides a further insight into Gaines’s creative art. However, in spite of its relevance and contributive trend, the points of interest, such as *“Gainesian pan-Africanism”* and *“intercultural patterns”* are less analyzed; they remain unknown. As such, they need to be re-assessed for a deep insight into Gaines’s literary vision.

^{viii} « Marquage idéologique » (Jouve, 2002).

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