Power Play in the African-American Home: Female Authority and Male Neglect in the Private Spheres of Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying, Of Love and Dust,* and *In My Father's House*

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An Introduction to Gaines's Spaces: Powerful Females and the Private Sphere

In his essay "Miss Jane and I," Ernest J. Gaines describes his earliest attempts to write as endeavors to create simple stories "about people at home" (10). Growing up in Louisiana was central to the formation of Gaines's identity, and his childhood community became a primary influence in his work. Drawing from the memories of his life in the South, Gaines writes layers of significance into the spaces of the fictitious towns he creates in his novels. Rather than reducing the environment to mere background material,[1] Gaines's private and public spaces both communicate to and inform his audience of power struggles. In his novels, *A Lesson Before Dying, Of Love and Dust,* and *In My Father's House,* the locales, the very spaces themselves, inform. In Gaines's works, space can be filled by a mother's presence, or signify a father's absence; the kitchen can be used as a courtroom, a jail cell can become a study, and a field can become a bedroom.

Gaines also comments on the power struggles in society through the private struggle for authority within the African-American home. Especially significant to Gaines's stories are the differing ways in which the female and male characters inhabit and use private and public spaces. The strength of the female characters can be seen in the authority they have over their domestic space. The growth and maturity of the male characters can be seen in the responsibility they take in the private, domestic sphere. Female characters take control of a room of their own,[2]

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[1] In his book *The Grammar of Discourse*, Robert E. Longacre asserts that setting is typically mere background material, and that locations and locales are lower on the saliency scale for their revelatory importance in narrative (24).

[2] The ability of private space to cause changes in identity, or in the balance of power in society, is the foundation of literary critic and author Virginia Woolf's lecture "A Room of One's Own." In her lecture address to a young women's college, Woolf asserts the creative and intellectual importance of having money and a room of one's own: "[I]t is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry" (182). Marginal groups need to have control of space in order to have power and contribute to society (188).

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as impoverished as it may be, and extend the private sphere to gain control in society, or the public realm, which, in Gaines's novels, is often controlled by white males. Gaines's male characters often flee from the domestic sphere and transgress private boundaries in an attempt to gain control in society. The different ways in which females and males inhabit and manipulate private and public space affect the progression of their personal identity, as well as the balance of power in the home. The female characters manipulate their private space for the good of their families and the community; the male characters neglect private space to gain power in the public sphere.

The strength of Gaines's female characters can be seen in their powerful and creative means of inhabiting and using space for themselves and their community. The women in Gaines's novels are not oppressed by their socially constrictive spaces. This powerful female presence and assertion has its roots in "Womanism," a term coined by Alice Walker, who set forth her own poetic definition of black feminism. Sherley Anne Williams explains Womanism as a non-partial theory which, by definition, is "'committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people,' female and male" (70). Gaines's female characters, then, can be considered a picture of Womanism, as they not only take control of their own lives, but strive to preserve the lives of all within their community. One of the sources of tension within the novel *Of Love and Dust* is the fight between Aunt Margaret and Marcus, as she not only tries to keep the convict from disrupting the plantation, but tries to protect his own life as well. Aunt Margaret's efforts to preserve herself and protect her plantation community display womanist values, and do not delineate her as an oppressed character.

Though Gaines's female characters are the authorities, they are not idealistic black "superwomen" either. In her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black

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Women in the South," Alice Walker comments on the stereotypes given to African-American women: "Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, 'the mule of the world,' because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else - everyone else - refused to carry. We have also been called 'Matriarchs,' 'Superwomen,' and 'Mean and Evil Bitches.' Not to mention 'Castraters' and 'Sapphire's Mama'" (par 4). In his novels, Gaines creates females that transcend these stereotypes of strong African-American women by writing his authoritative women as mixed characters. Mentioning Gaines in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,* Walker discusses Gaines's realistic and complex characters: "It is a credit to a writer like Ernest J. Gaines . . . that he can write about white and blacks exactly as he sees them and knows them, instead of writing one group as a vast malignant lump and of the other as a conglomerate of perfect virtues" (19). Gaines's character, Miss Julie, in *Of Love and Dust,* defies stereotypes because though she is motherly and religious, she is also like a "gangster" (Gaines 10). Glenda Dickerson states that although African-American women can be like Atlas, who holds the burdens of the world between his shoulders, they can also be like Bessie Smith "who said 'I'll shoot you if you stand still and cut you if you run'" (180). Dickerson goes on to assert that, in black feminist literature, stereotypes are to be replaced with "archetypes" from folklore, from the stories that "Grandma say" (180).

Also searching for archetypal women in the African-American community, Walker writes that the "artist-mother" archetypes were "lowbrow" (44); the women used what they had to create beauty as "cooking, gardening, quilting, storytelling" became their art (44). This connection of the female role to folklore and the domestic sphere adds to the power of the Womanist characters. Walker asserts that these archetypes "remind us that Art, and the thought and sense of beauty on which it is based, is the province not only of those with a room of their

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own, or of those in libraries, universities, and literary renaissances – that *creating* is necessary to those who work in kitchens and factories, nurture children and adorn homes" (44). Gaines frequently admits to drawing from his aunt, grandmothers, and the women in his community, as well as their folklore, to create his stories. Gaines's ability to avoid reductive stereotypes, and therefore create a believable humanity in his archetypal characters, makes the authority of the female characters credible; both their struggle and their creativity in coping are genuine.

Since Womanism is focused on sustaining the home and protecting the community, the private, domestic sphere is central to African-American women's power and authority. A simple definition of private space can be limited to the environment of the home, in contrast to the public domain beyond the property line. The traditional view of the private sphere has always been that it is the realm of the female; the public realm is dominated by the male (Gallagher 277). Both environments have their own set of socially constructed rules. Theorist and critic Michelle Rosaldo argues "that although the public/male, domestic/female dichotomy is not universal, it is relevant to the construction of gender and to female subordination in the western world" (qtd. in Stone and McKee 17). Rosaldo goes on to assert that, traditionally, the domestic sphere has been assigned less value. Though the private space of the home is the sphere of the woman, and the public realm is generally thought of as the male domain, the boundary between the two worlds can be pushed, redefined, or extended by individual action. In Gaines's novels, the male characters are often fighting the authority of the females within the home, and seeking their power in society.

Private or domestic space in Gaines's novels has three dimensions. First, the private space of the home begins at the property line, most often marked by a fence. The yard, the porch, and the kitchen are all social spaces, in which the characters have limited privacy in an

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environment that is intimate, yet inhabited by others. Contrasting to the social spaces in the home are the intimate sanctuaries of rooms such as the bedroom or studies. The most personal space would be the actual self: the body and the mind of the character. Protecting the self, according to Womanism, is a part of protecting the home. All three dimensions of the private sphere – the social, the intimate, and the self – are manipulated and controlled by the women in Gaines's novels. Commenting on the inseparability of the private sphere and the power of women in her book, *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies,* Arlene Voski Avakian asserts that "the work of resistance to assimilation is done by women in the private sphere" (11). The revision of the oppressive space as a means of power within the community and a connection to patriarchal society is an act of authority for the female characters.

Though Gaines's female characters are constricted spatially, they possess the domestic sphere and exert authority in a way that gives them power within the community. The command of Gaines's female characters is displayed in the ways they inhabit, use, and manipulate (without violence, as the male characters often do) the physical space of both the private and public sphere, using it as a source of strength and connection to society. In her essay, "A Map for Rereading," Annette Kolodny insists that a feminist criticism requires that a special "attentiveness" should be given to domestic space as a context of judgment (158). Kolodny asserts that setting is "semantically relevant" (156). In Gaines's novels, the domestic realm, in a feminist context, is pregnant with what Kolodny terms "symbolic implications" (158). Gaines's female characters are not idealistic stereotypes or properties, but authoritative, self-possessed, and influential characters. The origin of the female's power comes from her control of the private, domestic sphere, a space that becomes a source of her power in the context of society. In *Women, Culture, and Society,* Rosaldo writes about the possibility of marginal space being

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manipulated to create a place of power in society: "The very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth" (131). In *A Lesson Before Dying,* Miss Emma and Tante Lou gain access to prison because of their cooking. Though the women may not have the social sway they would need to set Jefferson free, they do have the ability to communicate such powerful emotions as love and their belief in Jefferson's dignity and self-worth through their kitchens and the food they provide.

The restrictive boundaries between the private and public worlds are also blurred as the marginal male characters struggle to establish themselves and their communities. The maturity and responsibility of the male characters in Gaines's novels is depicted in their reconciliation to the domestic sphere. Women use the domestic space as a source of creativity and strength, and for positive change in their communities. The male characters flee or neglect the home, or cross social boundaries for personal gain. The different motives of the struggle for power in society for both the female and male characters in Gaines's novels shows the presence of a power struggle within the African-American community. Gaines's work highlights the male absence from the home to draw attention to a destructive problem within the African-American community for both families and the community as a whole. Though male neglect of the domestic sphere is evident in all three novels, *In My Father's House* most clearly displays the author's concern with the lacking presence of the African-American male in family life.

The question involved in the manipulation of spaces is one of authority.[3] Since the home is the initial space in which identity begins to form, the presence of the female in the domestic

[3] Gilbert and Gubar quote Edward Said's definition of the term authority, rooted in male-ness: "*Authority* suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings: not only, as the OED tells us, 'a power to enforce obedience,' or 'a derived or delegated power,' or 'a power to influence action,'

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sphere enables her to exert influence over the development of others. Authority can be defined as "that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish" (Gilbert and Gubar 7). The male "generative power" in Said's definition is carried by the females in Gaines's novels. When women have this authority, they have the power to release the autonomous self (Gilbert and Gubar 16). The female characters enable others to find their identities. Thus, through times of hardship and social change, the women remain dependable; they create the home, or even extend its comfort and power to the public world. In Gaines's novels, managing the home does not mean the absence of thought, creativity or power. If his female protagonists are ever hesitant, it is generally due to their protective nature, and their desire to do what is best for themselves and for the whole community. The females carry the identity of the whole community, and are responsible for continuing its well-being, as well as directing the constructive changes that need to be made.

The power struggles between the female and the male within the home reflect the power struggles that the African-American community faces within society. Gaines uses the private and public spaces in his novels to show this struggle for authority. A detailed explanation of the private sphere begins at the property line, often marked by a fence. Fences separate the home and yard from the fields or neighborhood, serving as a dividing wall between the outside world and the intimacy of the home. On the inside of the fence, the yard becomes a more personal space than the field. Unlike public roads and fields, a yard belongs to a singular home and family. In Gaines's novel *In My Father's House,* the fence around Phillip's front yard plays an important and symbolic role in the spatial, and therefore emotional, separation that he has from his son,

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or 'a power to inspire belief,' or 'a person whose opinion is accepted,'; not only those, but a connection as well with *author* – that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something… Finally, it means continuance, or a causing to continue" (*Madwoman in the Attic* 4).

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Etienne, who grew up unacknowledged, outside of the home. Phillip's fence is a means of division. Thus, Etienne is confined to the periphery of the public world, as he lives in the ghetto and is denied the power that would come with his father's home. His dwelling is within a social sphere that conveys his worthlessness.

The porch is a space that is communal in nature and the place where company gathers freely. The porch serves as the front line of the home. Hirschon states that the porch is described as a place of conversation and observation of "neighborhood activity"; the space of the porch is an extension of the inside realm. Although it is technically outside of the house, the porch serves as a mediator between the private and public worlds (71). Gallagher adds to the significance of the space of the porch for women by defining it as an "enriching" space, exposing women to both the private and the public world (47). The porch is a place where members of a household can sit, often joined by neighbors, to watch and judge the rest of the community. The porch is a social place in the home; the female characters use this space to assert their opinions about matters within the community.

Also a communal space, the kitchen is powerful because it functions as the place where meal creating and sharing takes place; the process of cooking and the sharing of food connects women with society and give them value. The female characters in Gaines's novels provide nourishment and communicate love through the activities associated with the kitchen. Highlighting the powerful centrality of a kitchen in the home, Avakian states that "in their food practices women resist oppression through racism, colonialism, and globalization"; she also discusses "how women survive starvation conditions; how ethnicity intersects with gender, race and class through cooking, serving, and eating food; how food practices are implicated in the construction of American whiteness" (viii). Women have power through the decisions they make

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in the kitchen. In her research on Womanism, Layli Phillips discusses the power of kitchen table politics: "[W]hen the kitchen table metaphor is applied to political problem-solving situations, the relations of domination and subordination break down in favor of more egalitarian, interpersonal processes" (*The Womanist Reader* xxvii). By dominating the space of the kitchen, and exercising creativity in meal planning and preparing, Gaines's female characters resist oppression and defeat for themselves and their community.

Though the kitchen can be a place of oppression, because of its isolating nature between women and men, as well as the African-American community and society, Gaines uses the place as a source of power unique to African-American women. Traditionally, "good manners" demanded that the kitchen be alienated from the rest of the home (Gallagher 81). In both *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Of Love and Dust,* Gaines sets his story in the 1940s, so the isolation of the kitchen becomes an element of the marginal characters' oppression. The females in Gaines's novels use food and the atmosphere of the kitchen as a means of communication; more than just functioning as a "woman's sphere," the kitchen is a gathering place for the whole community, and is the setting in scenes of judgment, decision, and tribulation. The kitchen is so important in controlling and sustaining life that it often extends itself outside of the home and into the public world. For example, the plantation community regularly brings all of Jefferson's favorite foods to his jail cell before his execution to show they love and care for him, and believe that he is a valuable human being. Thus, the space of the kitchen and the activities of that room are used to manipulate society. The power that the female characters achieve, by manipulating society for the good of their community through their kitchens, is a reverse in gender roles; the women are the authority, and they generate self worth in the individuals within their community. The way

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the women use the kitchen to their advantage gives them the power of a male within a patriarchal society.

Inside of the private space of the home, highly personal places lie behind closed doors, which, in Gaines's works, tend to be the library and bedrooms. The library or the study is often depicted as the white man's realm. Gallagher discusses how, during the Nineteenth century "information explosion," knowledge was democratized through public schools and libraries, and the library became an accepted status symbol (209). In only one of Gaines's novels, *In My Father's House,* does an African-American man, Reverend Phillip, have access to a study. Because Gaines sets this novel in the Civil Rights era, Phillip's power to access and control the space of his own personal library reflects the social current of his time. However, the study, even in the 1970's, is a place where the absence of women is often observable. Gallagher discusses how the office is a space that is intended to eliminate distraction and is usually "far above the noisy household" (223). When Phillip goes to his study, his wife's presence is frustrating to him; it is the room he goes to when he desires isolation and space to think. According to Woolf's criticism in *A Room of One's Own,* for a marginal character, in this case a woman, to gain access to or power over a study would signify a radical shift in the balance of the hierarchy of the home, as well as a shift in social power. The space of the study shows either the lack of authority by absence or the gaining of power by presence of a marginal character.

A room that is used by both sexes and all races is the bedroom. Bedrooms are obviously the most intimate, personal rooms in the home. Gallagher asserts that bedrooms are private sanctums, and that the room's "evolution from nest to master suite reflects the rising individual and right to privacy" (139). In Gaines's novels, the privacy of the bedrooms lends itself to the most important scenes outside of the kitchen. Since Gaines's female characters tend to require

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intimacy and connection in all areas of life, the bedroom can often be a safe place for them to speak; it is also a place where the male characters are often uncomfortable. The bedroom can also be a spiritual center, as Gallagher argues that the "bedroom's serenity and privacy also make it the home's likeliest place for prayer and meditation" (149). In *A Lesson Before Dying,* Grant uses his bedroom as a spiritual place to clear his head and think about God. In *Of Love and Dust,* Miss Julie gives Jim the sacred command to care for the convict, Marcus in her bedroom. Alma, Philip's wife in *In My Father's House,* uses the bedroom as a space in which she can confront her husband, an important public figure.

The right to privacy that the bedroom allows is central to the marriage relationship throughout *In My Father's House.* In this novel*,* the bedroom serves as a place for tense or intimate conversation in the changing relationship between Philip and his wife, Alma. In discussing the ability of the bedroom to effect intimacy, Gallagher writes that "[t]he privacy that suits it to be the home's personal sanctuary and romantic getaway also makes the bedroom the likeliest setting for the expression of negative emotions, from loneliness and sadness to the anger that fuels fights and even violence" (150). Gallagher continues to discuss the bedroom's ability to produce loneliness, stating that there is "profound loneliness in being in a room that is meant for intimacy but not having it" (130). When Alma finds out about Phillip's illegitimate son, she goes to the bedroom to cry. When Phillip proceeds to leave Alma in the room and go to find his son, she becomes profoundly lonely; she is distant and numb to everything around her, even her son, who has come to stand by her side. Thus the bedroom, a sacred place for the married couple, displays the lack of intimacy between Phillip and his wife; the lacking affection adds to the tragedy of the novel. Private space in Gaines's novels not only shows the tragedy within the African-American home, but mirrors the displacement the community faces in the public world.

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Broadly speaking, public space in Gaines's novels can be defined as the world beyond the home. Public, "local" places, such as the roads, fields, and the town are not completely disconnected from the home, but are contrasted with the space of the house. Transitioning from the private to the public world often means the enforcing of strict social boundaries which are not found within the home. The public world, full of socially constructed spaces that are defining, limiting and often oppressive, is generally not seen as being under the control of women. In his work on Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Lacan shows how a structure of society, a setting, and not necessarily the psychology of an individual, will produce an outcome – a theory that he calls "symbolic determination" (Leitch 1281). In Gaines's work, space can function to disclose information about a character or situation, regardless of whether or not all the information is explicitly stated. In his essay "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan discusses how these signs create "a structure into which the reader must fit his or her body" (1282). These signs create boundaries and lines which function as censors by division, for example, the language and imagery that divides the sexes by directing them into separate bathrooms, which Lacan terms "urinary segregation" (1294). The signifying structures created in society have the ability to cause oppression of power and value in those who are considered the "Other." Lacan accounts for oppression in society as an effect of language and semiotics. With his bathroom doors example, Lacan uses physical space to transform "Saussure's model of the sign . . . into a structure in which the representative function of the sign is less important than its law-giving function" (1294). The "law-giving function" in "urinary segregation" would be the law of division and the establishment of boundaries between sexes through public space. Theorist and critic Shirley Ardener continues to discuss the influence that society enables space to possess: "Once space has been bounded and shaped it is no longer merely a neutral background: it exerts

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its own influence" (12). Ardener's definition of space gives life to environment; the space is not "merely a neutral background," but possesses the ability to oppress or create boundaries that affect the psychology of the individual and the balance of power in society. By reversing gender-roles and crossing socially defined boundaries of gender and race, the female characters achieve a type of freedom in the home and within society.

The importance of what social sphere a certain character inhabits, in Gaines's novels, lends itself to the trepidation involved when a marginal character crosses boundaries or takes control of space that belongs to a socially powerful character. Social status can often be a humiliating factor. When Grant, the African-American professor in *A Lesson Before Dying,* has to wait for four hours in the kitchen for the white plantation owner to come home, he is being treated as if he had no value, though he is a respectable man with a university education. To escape this oppression, Grant refuses to eat in the kitchen, and waits until he gets to his own home. It is in his own home that Grant takes back his power, and therefore his usefulness, in society. Refusing to let his entrance through a back door into a kitchen take away from his valuable status in society as an educated professor, Grant vows never to come into the plantation owner's kitchen again. By removing himself from the degrading situation of waiting in the plantation owner's kitchen, Grant escapes the "sign" that Lacan argues define the person who inhabits the social construct.

Transgressing social boundaries often results in drastic psychological change. Moving from a public to a private sphere or from a lower class atmosphere to an upper class environment is a life-changing experience. Ardener discusses how moving from one physical space to another involves more than just crossing spatial boundaries. Ardener argues that societies culturally determine " boundaries on the ground," and that they "have divided the social into spheres,

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levels, and territories with invisible fences and platforms to be scaled by abstract ladders and crossed by intangible bridges with as much trepidation or exultation as on a plank over a raging torrent" (12). The shape into which society has bound a culture affects the human psychology; it shapes and defines the people in a way that radically alters their identity. The spaces of locale, time and social status all become as influential and present as characters themselves in Gaines's novels.

The relation between individuals and space is a spiritual one for Alice Walker. Walker discusses the inseparable nature of the tangible and the spiritual; the African-American writer's, and by extension, the character's search for freedom in his or her novels will always include a battle in which redemption of the soul and that of the body go together: "[B]lack writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* 5). Tangible freedom and power are synonymous with the redemption of the soul, the ultimate effect. Gaines's characters achieve freedom of body and soul through gaining power and status in their tangible, temporal and social spaces.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one discusses the power struggles concerning both race and gender, and the strong female characters in *A Lesson Before Dying.* The female characters create, sustain, and extend the home for their own personal benefit and for the good of their community. The power struggles that take place in or through the kitchen are the main sites of conflict. Significantly, the public spaces of the school and the county jail both get turned into kitchens at some point during the story.

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Grant is the plantation teacher who struggles against the authority that his aunt, Tante Lou, has within the home, as well as the oppression he faces in society. Tante Lou directs Grant's life and attempts to reconcile him to his Christian roots and to his plantation community, both of which he has rejected. Grant's schoolroom is located within the plantation community's church, an ironic setting for the young teacher who has rejected his faith, which is essential to his place in the plantation community. The transformation of the church each day into a schoolroom highlights the cultural and religious tension in the young professor's relationship with God. Though Grant bitterly rejects Christianity, his own plantation community reaches out to him when they cook and bring food and gifts to the school during the Christmas play. Grant also tries to reject the authority of the women in his community by attempting to escape his home, where his aunt has the power. He flees to Vivian, but also considers running away from her when she displays the power in their relationship after his bar fight.

Unlike Grant, who has a defiant and proud spirit, Jefferson has a lacking identity and no self-confidence. The county jail where Jefferson is being held for a murder he did not commit is a degrading space that dehumanizes the falsely accused inmate. To bring him back a sense of dignity, his community consistently sends him food. His mother, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou even turn the prison's public cafeteria into a home-like kitchen setting.

The places in this novel show Grant's struggle with his intellectual and spiritual life, and his rejection of the home and his community. The private spaces also display the Black women's creativity, authority, and ability to provide nourishment and sustenance to their community. The women are responsible for the cultivation of Jefferson's developing humanity and changing identity, as they force Grant to teach Jefferson and bring him food.

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Chapter two discusses the female characters in *Of Love and Dust* who are concerned with keeping the home and peace on the plantation. Gaines plays with reversing both gender and racial roles in the private and public world. The second chapter of this thesis delineates the personal and social change in this novel that comes from the crossing of these socially defined boundaries. The movement from the public to private world reflects the power-play between race and genders fighting for control.

It is also significant that the central male character in *Of Love and Dust* takes on a female role. For Jim, the role of homemaking and keeping are a burden commanded to him by Miss Julie. The strongest character in the novel is Miss Julie, who spends most of her time offstage, yet still controls much of the action throughout the novel. By bringing Jim into the private and sacred place of her bedroom, Miss Julie creates an atmosphere for conversation that lets Jim know how serious she is about Jim taking care of Marcus. Miss Julie commands Jim to care for Marcus, to protect his life, and to take on her role as Marcus's mother on the plantation. Aunt Margaret also encourages the care-taking role that Jim has for Marcus.

With the exception of Jim, the actions of most of the male characters in this novel are destructive to the home, as the male characters transgress boundaries in the public and private world. Though the female characters do not wish for the men to remain oppressed, the women resist the male's violent and often selfish attempts to change society. Together Aunt Margaret and Jim attempt to stop an interracial love affair between Marcus and the overseer's wife, Louise. Marcus and Louise do not want to be together out of genuine love, but out of selfish motives. Their reckless affair leads to violence and death on the plantation. Gaines comments on oppression within the home and the African-American community through their love affair. Jim's conflict with his female role as care-taker and his admiration for Marcus's courage also

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show the tension and changing nature of the African-American male's role in the home and society.

Continuing on the theme of tension of the African-American male's place in the home and in society, the third chapter discusses the novel *In My Father's House,* which is about male neglect of the home. Gaines portrays the entire home as a foundational part of a thriving human existence. Gallagher asserts the power of place in the earliest stages of developing life: "Collaborations between brains and environments . . . begin at the earliest stages of life, in the surprisingly complex world of the womb" (98). She continues, "[W]e work hard to keep our settings predictable" (129). The male neglect of the home is the catalyst for instability, and unpredictability of environment. The most explicit example of male neglect causing unpredictability in Gaines's works is the relationship between Phillip and Etienne.

Gaines comments on the emotional space and distance between fathers and sons during a highly political time for the African-American community, as the novel takes place towards the end of the Civil Rights movement. Even if they have space at a lunch counter, the negative presence of empty space between father and a son is still affecting their community. Unprotected from poverty, rape, hunger, and violence, Philip's first, neglected family suffers without his presence. The neglected son is an unsolved problem within the home that has not been helped by Phillip's attention to the Civil Rights movement, and his fight for power in society.

Etienne, the Reverend's bastard son, lives in poverty and unpredictability. The absence of Etienne from Phillip's home allows the reverend to forget about his troubled and impoverished past. Now a powerful Civil Rights leader, Phillip has a new family, an established identity and predictability of environment. Etienne is absent from his father's house and instead is a recluse who lives in extreme poverty with his mother and siblings. Phillip's absence then becomes a

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"negative presence" (Ardener 13), which has devastating effects on his son. Gaines portrays Phillip's focus on his public life as having a destructive effect on his private life. Throughout the novel, Phillip's home and personal life are destroyed.

Etienne spends most of his life in a crypt-like bedroom until he gets up to go find his father in order to kill him. When Etienne arrives in town, his presence in Philip's living-room de-centers the Civil Rights leader's new identity so radically that the strong man cannot stand. Etienne's presence brings along memories and a burden that destroys Philip's new identity built on lies. The burden of Etienne's presence in Phillip's new town forces the reverend to reconcile his new, affluent life with the neglected family he started in his reckless youth.

Though Philip's wife Alma is a quiet character, she possesses all of the authority and strength in the home. Throughout the novel, Phillip loses his status in society, his respectability in the community, and his place in his home. When he has a breakdown at the end of the novel, he only has enough strength left to crawl into Alma's arms. Cradling him like a baby, Alma assures her husband that they can start again; she is the one with the vision for her family's future.

Gaines's spaces serve as sites for power negotiation, in particular within his ethnic community. The boundary markers of the private and public world both reveal a social power structure as well as provide opportunities to question it. The various characters' responses to space show the authority that they hold within the home and in society. The women's stability in and use of the home gives them the authority in the novels. The measure in which the male characters are reconciled to their place shows their progressing maturity, identity and strength.

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Chapter One: Females as Providers of Home and Identity in *A Lesson Before Dying*

In *A Lesson Before Dying,* Gaines uses space to display struggles for power in the private and public world. During a moment of reflection on the lack of progress towards social equality that he is sensing for his community, Grant says, "Vivian said things were changing, but where were they changing?" (151). Grant does not ask "how" things were changing for his community; he asks "where" they were changing. Grant's attention and obsession with the public sphere displays Gaines's theme of the African-American male's neglect of the home. The male characters are fighting for power in society, while the female characters already have authority in the home, using the power to manipulate African-American society. The ability for private space to function as a vehicle for social change can be seen as Grant's schoolroom and Jefferson's jail cell both get transformed into kitchens. The African-American women also display the connection between power and the private realm as they use their kitchens as makeshift courtrooms, or places of judgment and decision.

Set in a Southern plantation community in the 1940's, long before the Civil Rights movement, this historical setting affects the meaning of the physical spaces within society and the home. The kitchen on a plantation in the 1940's was still a symbol of slavery in the white man's house, and a symbol of power in the small plantation homes inhabited by the African-American families. When Grant has to enter Mr. Pichot's house, he must come through the back door, signifying his lower standing in society. The presence of racism and degradation are prevalent throughout the novel as the plantation community is treated as lower class, and oppressed in the public world.

In addition to the social struggle for power and worth in the public world, the African-American males in this novel struggle against the authority of the women who run their homes.

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This struggle for power between genders is most evident in the relationship of Grant and Tante Lou. Tante Lou and Miss Emma direct Grant's life, and use his teaching abilities to restore the community, despite his lack of willingness. Grant also struggles against the authority of his girlfriend, Vivian, who takes control during a bar fight and chastises Grant's immaturity.

Educated at a prestigious university, Grant is no longer content with the dehumanizing racism in his small Southern hometown. Longing to have control in the public world, Grant often feels oppressed within his own home, and constantly tries to escape his community in order to assert himself in society. Throughout the novel, Grant looks at his job of educating African-American children and changing the future for their race as hopeless. Grant does not look to his family, community, or to God for help, but depends upon his own strength and actions for salvation. Ironically, Grant teaches in a church. By combining Grant's two overwhelming struggles, helping his community and believing in God into one room, Gaines adds tension to the novel through the setting of Grant's occupation. In one scene, Grant discusses the setting of his school: "[M]y classroom was the church . . . My desk was a table, used as a collection table by the church on Sundays, and also used for the service of the Holy Sacrament on the fourth Sunday of each month . . . Behind my desk was the pulpit and the altar . . . This was my school" (34). By changing the church into a school, Gaines suggests the sacred nature of teaching the plantation children what they would need to know in order to change their world.

It is also significant that Grant has a near-violent conflict with the plantation's minister. The struggle between the teacher in the church and the minister of the church signifies the cultural tension of the educated black community and "white man's religion," or Christianity. Through the space of the church, Gaines comments the division between these members of the African-American community, who should be allies. The teacher's presence in the church places

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Grant unwillingly closer to God. Thus, Grant struggles to separate himself from the Christian church, and the association that the space makes between himself and the white community. Gaines frequently refers to Christianity as a religion of white men. In his short story "Christ Walked Down Market Street," Gaines's narrator asserts that his church is in the park, away from the structures built by oppressive men (*Mozart and Leadbelly* 74). At the end of the novel, on the day Jefferson is to be executed, Grant tells the children to cease their schoolwork and get on their knees to pray (*A Lesson Before Dying* 246). Instead of joining them in prayer, Grant has to actually leave the church-school building, saying, "I'll be outside" (250). By exiting the school, Grant shows his internal rejection of God by walking out of the room. His internal dialogue confirms his rejection of God: "Don't tell me to believe. Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders. Don't tell me to believe that God can bless this country and that men are judged by their peers. Who among his peers judged him? Was I there? . . . No. His peers did not judge him – and I will not believe" (251). In her book *The Power of Place,* Winifred Gallagher argues that through her research, she has found "exposure to large systems of physical organization [nature], preferably while working the body, almost invariably [bring] glimmerings of hope and purpose" (21). It is only by escaping the church-school and walking through the field that Grant is able to come to terms with Jefferson's execution and deal with his anger at God.

Gaines sets scenes of tension and trial in the kitchen to effectively communicate the rich significance of these defining struggles for the black community to his audience. Folks argues that Gaines makes efforts to "lay bare a cultural tradition and to write narratives in which the past constitutes the basis for a progressive vision of the future" ("Communal Responsibility"). Gaines uses his memories of the kitchen from his own childhood in the plantation community to

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comment about the black community's place and progress in society. In the kitchen the black male was generally absent; the black female was present and strong, and the white male was uncomfortable. The spaces in this novel constitute the unspoken meaning within every interaction and dialogue, signifying progressing identities and shifts in power within the home and society.

The kitchens within the homes on the plantation serve as settings where power struggles unique to the African-American community take place, and where important gender or societal roles are reversed. These kitchen scenes highlight the absence of a strong African-American male, specifically, a father figure, and simultaneously reinforce the presence of the powerful black female. In addition to being the setting for these gender role reversals, the kitchen, once a place where slaves were made to serve, becomes the African-American woman's effective tie to society. The kitchen, an atmosphere of rich communication, becomes Miss Emma and Tante Lou's makeshift courtroom and their connection to the white community. Viewing the significant kitchen scenes in *A Lesson Before Dying* manifests how Gaines uses the kitchen as a place of powerful personal and social change.

The kitchen is a realm where Miss Emma and Tante Lou spend most of their time; it is where they feel comfortable and familiar with all that is around them. Thus, the women are in a position of power while in the kitchen, and what they decide, state, or command from the kitchen table holds powerful sway within the community. In her article "Old Fashioned Modernism," written on the African-American community's different ways of creating meaning, Valerie Babb states that "[a]s peoples displaced from their own lands and cultures and forced to adapt to the cultures of the U.S., African Americans have a long history of revising and recreating, of taking alien conventions and transferring them into embodiments of their traditions and identities"

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(250). Miss Emma, Jefferson's "nannan," struggles against the absent father figure in the black community, and against the ever-present white male and his judicial system. Several other kitchen scenes throughout the novel display the ongoing personal change and development of the characters, as well as signify the current of social changes concerning race in America.

Gaines writes skillfully about the distinctive past of African Americans by continually inserting their unique struggles through the story's kitchen scenes. In her article "Storytelling and the Law," Marcia Gaudet states that in chapter one "Grant presents the official courtroom narratives as reported speech. The rest of the novel [chapters two through thirty one] presents the alternate story, the cultural narrative constructed by the African American community" (127). This alternate story takes place primarily in the kitchen because, as Courtney Ramsay discusses in her essay, "food . . . not only provides nourishment and a means by which love is expressed but also serves as a medium to exert power, to express other emotions of acceptance of rejection, and to communicate these feelings to others" ("Louisiana Foodways" 46). In *How to Cook a Wolf,* MFK Fisher discusses the theme of expressing oneself in the kitchen when she asserts that people in stressful situations need more from food than just its nutritional content. The valuable position that the female characters have in their home and their community through the kitchen elevates them to a position of power, and what they decide, state, or command from the kitchen table holds powerful sway within the community.

In the first kitchen scene, Miss Emma and Tante Lou are recuperating after hearing Jefferson's sentencing. Both ladies are offended at Jefferson's unjust ruling; however, their determination and strength in the face of the degradation Jefferson received when he was called a "hog" overrules their hurt (Gaines 8). Knowing that Jefferson will be wrongly executed regardless of any attempts to clear his name, Miss Emma simply desires for him to go to the

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chair with dignity, because, as one critic notes, the black community has long had a "cultural narrative of death with dignity" ("Storytelling and the Law" 126). As Miss Emma and Tante Lou wait for Grant to get home from teaching, they conveniently place themselves in the kitchen. When Grant comes home and sees both of the women seated at the kitchen table, he immediately tries to escape the situation, knowing that something important is about to take place. When Grant is finally forced to take his place at the kitchen table, he observes just how much power the women have: "I sat back in the chair and looked at both of them. They sat there like boulders, their bodies, their minds immovable" (Gaines 14). Similar to Jefferson's trial earlier in the day, Tante Lou then (in the kitchen) proceeds to "sentence" Grant to visit Jefferson in jail. Both aunts ask Grant to take his college education and his learning into Jefferson's jail cell and give the convict a lesson about his dignity and worth. Thus, Grant is to spend a considerable amount of time in jail over the next several months, attempting to turn an illiterate plantation farm-boy into a dignified man.

Both Miss Emma and Tante Lou solidify their position of authority and strength in their "sentencing" over Grant and their provision of company for Jefferson. In her essay on the power of black women in the community, Gaudet notes that "[c]ertainly the most popular, positive, and pervasive women in Gaines's fiction are the elderly aunts or aunt figures. They have positions of power and respect within the community, and they seem to combine strength, humanity, and an assured wisdom about life" ("Black Women" 140). The authority of Tante Lou and Miss Emma also highlights the absence of a strong male figure. There is no father in Tante Lou's kitchen to command Grant to help Jefferson. Similarly, Jefferson does not have a father who comes to ask for Grant's help.

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Miss Emma and Tante Lou not only struggle with the absence of a father figure within their own community, but they resist the overbearing presence and rule of the white male. The next important kitchen scene takes place when Miss Emma and Tante Lou go to Henry Pichot's kitchen. Grant observes the two women, who are both extremely aware of their surroundings as they look around the kitchen, having served from Mr. Pichot's kitchen nearly their entire lives. When Mr. Pichot and his guests come to the kitchen to speak with Miss Emma, it is clear that the men are irritated and uncomfortable. Mr. Pichot "seemed annoyed that he had been disturbed while he had company" (Gaines 20). Miss Emma then asks Mr. Pichot for the favor of letting Grant go and visit Jefferson in his jail cell. As Mr. Pichot rattles his glass and has his servant refill it with more alcohol, it is clear that the plantation owner wants desperately to leave the kitchen. When Miss Emma asks Mr. Pichot when he will do her the favor of speaking to the sheriff, Pichot grouchily replies, "'Whenever I see him; that's when' . . . 'Now if you don't mind, I have a guest.' He drank and turned away" (Gaines 23). Miss Emma calls after him as he exits the kitchen, but "she was speaking to empty space. Henri Pichot and Lois Rougon were already in the library" (Gaines 23). It is significant that Pichot escapes Miss Emma by retreating from the kitchen into the library, a place of learning where the white man obviously holds the advantage and the power over the illiterate women.

Because books are generally absent from the kitchen, the atmosphere and the food within the kitchen act as agents of nonverbal communication. Gaudet discusses the presence of varying options for communication in the African-American community when she discusses how Gaines "questions the ability of the legal and social systems to achieve justice. By giving a voice to the stories of the traditionally unvoiced, [the novel] provides an alternate discourse" (125). Ramsay notes that "[i]n a culture where the voices of the people have been silenced, food becomes an

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even more essential currency of exchange, and at times the only comprehensible means of communication" ("Louisiana Foodways" 57). The kitchen in Gaines's novel, then, functions as a private space in which the women use their creativity and ability to cook to communicate the truth of Jefferson's human dignity to him, despite what the "white man" or the law has said.

A key space in this novel is the county jail and its transformation into both a kitchen and an office for Jefferson. Through the visits Jefferson receives from family and friends, who bring food and other gifts such as radios and notebooks to the cell, the convict begins to experience significant personal growth. As Grant convinces Jefferson that his worthlessness is a "myth," the prisoner's identity begins to strengthen as Jefferson begins to believe he has value (192). Jefferson continues to show improvements as he develops interest in life around him, the first of which is his initial attempt to eat his food in the proper manner, and with the proper utensils.

The power of women using the space they have for the advantage of their community occurs when Miss Emma and Tante Lou attempt to rectify Jefferson's tragedy through their kitchens. By sending Grant, with food, to the jail-cell, or by literally bringing a kitchen herself, Miss Emma succeeds in transforming Jefferson's cell into a private space. In the essay "The Sociology of Food and Eating," Anne Murcott discusses how bringing a kitchen to the jail cell, repeatedly, would aid in shaping Jefferson's identity: "So eating habits are viewed as a matter of culture, a product of codes of conduct and of the structure of social relationships" (1). Murcott continues to develop the spiritual and emotional significance of proper manners in food consumption: "eating is a matter of morality" (1). Thus, proper eating and behaving at a table signifies the cultivation and progress of Jefferson's identity; he is growing towards accepting his humanity and his fate.

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Perhaps the most emotionally-charged struggle in the novel is Jefferson's fight against the sub-human myth that was forced upon the slaves. Jefferson is oppressed not only by mainstream society's degrading voice, but by his own self-defeating voice within his head. Jefferson has been taught that his race is inferior, and he personally believes that he is a worthless human being. Although Jefferson quietly accepts his wrongful sentencing, Grant discovers that he is seething with bitterness and hurt. Each time that Grant visits the jail, he brings a large bag of warm home-cooked food with him to the cell. During the first few visits, Jefferson refuses to eat, saying "chicken, dirt, it don't matter" (Gaines 73). Jefferson even resorts to throwing food on the floor: "'Manners is for the living,' he said. He looked at me awhile, then he swung around and knocked the bag of food off the bunk. The bag burst open on the floor, and there was fried chicken and biscuits and baked sweet potatoes all over the place. 'Food for the living too'" (130). Grant attempts to tell Jefferson that he is "a human," worthy of life; however, Jefferson treats the teacher with bitterness and contempt (83). It is significant that Jefferson progresses in the acceptance of his humanity, worth and dignity, only as he progresses with eating in an acceptable manner. During an early visit, Jefferson "knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog" (83). Jefferson's behavior shows his denial of Grant's words and of his community's love, and his acceptance of the white man's judgment. Towards the end of Grant's visits, Jefferson begins to actually eat bits of the food that Tante Lou and Miss Emma have cooked for him.

The function of the kitchen as a source of sustenance and a means of nourishment extends itself outside the space of the home when Miss Emma brings her kitchen to the county

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jail. The turning point in Jefferson's progress takes place when Jefferson's community actually brings a traditional plantation kitchen and meal to the jailhouse:

> Miss Emma and my aunt spread out a tablecloth on the table, then they placed a pan, a spoon, and a paper napkin in five places. After they had set up everything, they and the minister sat down, but I remained standing. The first thing you heard were the chains around his ankles, then Jefferson entered the room through the rear door, followed by the deputy. (188)

As they sit at the carefully made up table, Jefferson bows his head and refuses to eat. Sitting down at meal of gumbo gives Grant the opportunity to engage in peer support and positive conversation with Jefferson. Grant asks Jefferson to walk about the room with him, and he begins to engage Jefferson in a poignant conversation about his humanity.

At one point during the walk Grant defines the word "hero" for Jefferson, saying "A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do . . . I could never be a hero" (191). Grant goes on to say that "[t]hey expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying that you don't have it – that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong" (191). Grant continues to attack the authority of the white male and the judicial system when he questions their power and their humanity: "That jury? You call them men? That judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better" (192). The dehumanizing effects of slavery have turned the white men into the beasts that they claim the black slaves were. Grant then notices that Jefferson was crying, and wonders if the convict is thinking "lowly as I am, I am still part of the whole" (194). Grant then makes a rich suggestion denoting his love for Jefferson when he gently states, 'Come on,' . . . 'Let's have some gumbo.' And we went back to the table" (194). After this pivotal scene, the growth of Jefferson's identity

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progresses rapidly, and can be seen in Jefferson's agreement to sit at the table and eat his meal with a fork. Moving from eating on the floor with his hands to sitting at a table with a fork is a development that shows growth in the respect that Jefferson has for himself.

It is only when Jefferson's family and friends bring a familiar kitchen scene to the jail, that he changes his attitude and begins to accept his status within their community, as a man. Folks argues that the act of heroism is collective and impossible without a surrounding community. In his article, Folks discusses the importance of the kitchen by stating that "the women participate in and incite the heroism of Grant and Jefferson by a number of actions that reinforce their communal ties. In prison, Jefferson responds to Miss Emma by eating a bite of her gumbo – signaling his acknowledgement of his social ties to her" (7). The kitchen scene that takes place in the prison is the birth of Jefferson's realization and acceptance of his dignity and worth, as well as the fact that he belonged to a community.

The culmination of Jefferson's progress, and the effect the kitchen had on him, can be seen in his final meal. In Jefferson's last meal, his requests have been refined from gallons of ice cream to a reasonable request for a simple meal and a small cup of ice cream (232). Ramsay states that "[i]n Jefferson's diary, the notations made about his last meal confirm the drastic changes in his personality – changes in his self-identity" (55). As Jefferson's self-identity strengthens, he becomes the figure of the strong black man that has been missing through the whole novel. Folks argues that "[i]n restoring Jefferson's status as a worthy member of society, Gaines focuses in particular upon the importance of male role models in the family and community" ("Communal Responsibility"). After his last supper, Jefferson then calmly walks like a dignified man to the electric chair. One witness, Paul, later tells Grant that Jefferson was the "strongest man" in the room (Gaines 253). Primarily because of the food-sharing that taks

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place in the prison, Jefferson is able to go through a healthy personal change in a jail cell. The food that the women provide for the convict creates fellowship between the community and Jefferson, and empowers Jefferson, giving him a renewed sense of his value.

As Jefferson's humanity progresses by the help of the kitchen and food, he begins to turn his jail cell into an office. Jefferson develops an interest in the radio Grant brought him, and he also agrees to use a notebook and pencil (185). The convict requests to have the light left on at night, and writes until early in the morning. Thus Jefferson defeats the racist views that put him in the cell by using it to behave in an intellectual way, which he was supposedly incapable of achieving: "Jefferson has filled 3 quarters of the first page. The letters were large and awkward, the way someone would write who could barely see. He had written across the lines instead of above them. He has used the eraser so much that in some places the paper was worn through . . . he had written": "Man walks on two foots; hogs on four hoofs" (220). His pencil was worn down to the tip, and Grant offers to bring him a sharpener; he also tells Jefferson to stop erasing (220). In a scene that signifies the convict's personal growth and new-found strength, Jefferson faces the window, his broad back to Grant, who is sitting on the floor. His arms outstretched, Jefferson accepts his humanity, saying "Yes, I'm you man," and also accepting his fate: he asks Grant how the electric chair will feel. He then sits down next to the teacher and asks him "Care for a 'tato Mr. Wiggins?" (225). In this pivotal moment, Jefferson is the strongest character; he is more of a man than Grant is, and he is the one providing nourishment.

Chapter twenty-nine, the chapter directly after Jefferson's acceptance of his humanity and his fate, is merely a record of Jefferson's diary entries. He discusses how he wanted to write through the night until the early morning (227). Jefferson shows the continuing developments of his humanity through the writing he does in his office. He shows his humorous side as he

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confesses that he was glad Paul, the white police officer, saved him from the Easter talk the Reverend and Miss Emma were giving to him (227). Jefferson then begins to record his memories. He talks about the town drunk, and how he liked him because the drunk gave him "candy an cake" (228). He also records confessions of his youth, saying that no one ever told Jefferson that they liked him, and so he did not know how to tell Grant that he liked him and wanted to be his friend (228). Jefferson even notices his own progress as he writes: "I ain't done this much thinkin and this much writn in all my life befor" (229). Jefferson spends the majority of his last days in his jail-cell-office, writing and thinking and coming to conclusions about his identity, God, and the community around him.

Though the kitchen serves as a place of empowerment for Jefferson, the private sphere is oppressive to Grant, as he tries to escape the authority of his aunt by running away from the domestic sphere. Grant wrestles against Tante Lou in his quest to become a strong male figure. Because Grant is upset by the orders from his aunt to visit Jefferson in jail, Grant begins to treat her unkindly. After leaving Henry Pichot's house, an important power play takes place between Tante Lou and Grant:

> 'I'll be home to cook in a little while,' [Tante Lou] said. 'I'll eat in town,' I told her. Tante Lou held the door while she stood there looking at me. Nothing could've hurt her more when I said I was not going to eat her food. I was supposed to eat soon after she cooked, and if I was not at home I was supposed to eat as soon as I came in. (Gaines 24)

By denying Tante Lou's food, Grant denies her love and sacrifice, hurting his aunt in the deepest manner. This attempt to hurt Tante Lou is Grant's assertion of his own strength against the sentencing he received in the kitchen from his aunt earlier that day. The next day, when

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Grant attempts to talk to his aunt, she brushes him off by coldly, saying "Food there if you want it. Or you can go back where you had supper last night" (Gaines 35). Ramsay notes that "[t]his control that Grant has of either eating or rejecting her food provides for him a sense of power" ("Louisiana Foodways" 51). Grant struggles underneath the rule that Tante Lou holds in the kitchen because, as a man, he desires to have the power that black males lack in the novel. However, with strong women in the way, he has a difficult time; Grant also struggles to gain power and be respectable because he never had a father figure in his life to set a good example.

Later in the novel, there is a kitchen scene in which Grant actually tries to rule the kitchen, therefore taking over the authority of his aunt. Shirley Ardener summarizes the way that people inhabit space together: "[P]eople may 'jockey for position' knowing that their fellows may read from this their social importance. Thus, as Hall puts it, *space speaks*" (12). The kitchen in Grant's home "speaks" of Tante Lou's authority. At one point in the novel, Vivian, Grant's girlfriend, comes to the house while Tante Lou and the other women from the plantation are at church. While the women are gone, Grant and Vivian eat the food and drink the coffee that Tante Lou had set out early that morning. When Tante Lou returns home, she and Grant have another argument, or power struggle, over who will do the work in the kitchen:

> 'I'll have to make some more coffee,' I said. 'I'll make my own coffee,' my aunt said. 'I'll make it,' I said. 'Not here.' 'Vivian and I drank the coffee, and I'll make more. That's all there is to it.' 'You go'n walk over me?' she asked. 'No ma'am, I'm going around you,' I said. 'But I'm going to make the coffee'. (113)

Thinking he has won, Grant watches as his aunt takes a seat at the table. However, with Tante Lou removed from the authoritarian position in the kitchen, the atmosphere is uncomfortable and tense. In her article on the black women in Gaines's novel, Gaudet states that the aunts,

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grandmas, and mothers are not wholly good nor evil, but realistic beings who show "something more complex, both as individuals and as character types" (140). Although Tante Lou is a loving aunt who has sacrificed her life to raise Grant, she is also one of the main obstacles in the way of Grant's quest to become a strong, respectable man. With Tante Lou still sitting, Grant attempts to step into authority and, clearly unnerved, he begins to order Vivian to help him make more food, to which his aunt replies "You taking over my house?" (Gaines 113). Grant then realizes that, even though his aunt is sitting at the table, she still holds the power; Grant reasserts the stone-like nature of Tante Lou by saying that she "was like a boulder in the road, unmovable" (113). The rest of the time that Grant and Vivian are in the kitchen, they are being silently judged by Tante Lou and her friends.

Knowing the place of power that women hold in their kitchens, and in her ethnic community, Vivian attempts to gain favor with Tante Lou while she is in the home, though Grant is clearly upset with his aunt. Vivian's attempt to side with Tante Lou increases the tension between Vivian and Grant's relationship. Vivian tells Tante Lou that she is proud to be a teacher, as opposed to Grant, who hates teaching. Vivian also discloses that she is a devout Catholic, which again is opposed to Grant, who does not believe in God. By the end of their afternoon coffee, Grant's aunt has decided that Vivian is a woman of "quality" (117). Because the kitchen serves as Tante Lou's courtroom, she boldly asserts her verdict several times, not only to show Vivian her approval, but to make Grant feel inferior to the woman he loves.

Grant and Vivian also have a pivotal kitchen scene, in which there are several instances where Grant attempts to escape the domestic sphere and the authority of his girlfriend. Vivian expresses her anger at Grant, due to his refusal to listen to her by leaving the intimate and private space of the bedroom. She goes into the kitchen and begins to make a salad, clearly upset. A few

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minutes later Grant follows her into the kitchen in an attempt to communicate with her, and to dispel her anger. Miscommunication during dinner heightens the tension; Grant is concerned about Jefferson, racism, and his bar fight; Vivian is concerned about her divorce papers, her children, and her future with Grant. Their frustrations are played out by the ways they inhabit the space in Vivian's home. When Grant tells her that he is going to leave, she responds by telling him that he is taking the "easy way out" (210). Refusing to let Grant continue his habit of escape and neglect, Vivian tells him that she needs more from him if he is going to be the man in her life. Grant loses his temper and tries to escape Vivian by leaving her kitchen. He describes the internal struggle he has when he considers fleeing from her home:

> I got up from the table. I jerked the towel from my head and slammed it down on my plate. 'You can have your goddamn red beans and rice and towel and everything else. Damn this shit.' I went to the front door and jerked it open, and there was the screen. And through the screen I could see outside into the darkness, and I didn't want to go out there. There was nothing outside this house that I cared for. Not school, not home, not my aunt, not the quarter, not anything in the world. I don't know how long I stood there looking out into the darkness — a couple of minutes, I suppose — then I went back into the kitchen. I knelt down and buried my face in her lap. (210)

By rejecting her care, the towel and the food, and going to the front door, Grant is trying to hurt and reject Vivian. In her article "Food, Power, and Female Identity," Carole M. Counihan states that "[w]omen gain influence (private power) through giving even as they may be locked out of coercive (public) power. In this analysis women feed others in return for love, favors, good behavior and the power that comes from being needed (qtd. in Avakian 8). Vivian is the stable

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and strong identity in this scene; her power comes through the food and care she has provided for Grant. Ardener discusses how, in many ethnic communities, a woman's worth is often synonymous with her skills in cooking. She goes on to assert the importance of women as comforters in ethnic communities: "The association of women with nourishment, the concept of the woman as a source of sustenance and her enduring association with food is a theme running through Greek culture (and may have universal expression)" (78). Grant confirms Vivian's strength and stability in his decision to return to her kitchen, his place of comfort, safety, and nourishment; he needs her. A significant development in Grant's maturity and responsibility within his community can be seen in his decision to return to Vivian's kitchen.

Though Grant's development in character is not as radical as Jefferson's, he does grow in maturity through his relationships with Vivian and Paul, the white police officer who befriended him at the prison. Grant's hope in progress is slightly restored when Paul comes to visit the plantation school. A significant shifting in the balance of power occurs when Paul leaves the security and comfort of his own place at the office and comes to praise Jefferson's actions, as he tells Grant that Jefferson was the bravest man in the execution room. Paul tells Grant that he will come back to the church-school one day and tell the kids about Jefferson's strength (256); Paul's willingness to be vulnerable and inhabit the space of a different ethnic community signifies the social change that Grant longs for throughout the novel. Grant then returns to the church-school, the tension still inside of him: he is simultaneously rejecting God and unable to pray, while carrying a hope for the future, for his students. He then leaves Paul and narrates his return to the classroom: "I turned from [Paul] and went into the church. Irene Cole told the class to rise, with their shoulders back. I went up to the desk and turned to face them. I was crying" (256). The

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inner turmoil within Grant can be seen in his restless going in and out of the school building on the day of Jefferson's execution, and his conversation with Paul.

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Chapter Two: Female as Protector of the Private Sphere in *Of Love and Dust*

In *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines's complex characters struggle with the changing social structures of a segregated South. Playing on the difference between African Americans from country and blacks from the city, Gaines shows a conflict within the community. This novel displays the varying ways in which different races and genders view the home. Fitting with his pattern, Gaines's African-American females care the most for the home and the community. The male characters are depicted as conflicted characters who display immaturity and a lack of responsibility for the private sphere. The African-American women on the plantation turn the oppressive nature of their place in society into a means for solidifying their own power. Marcus, the convict from the city, cannot accept the set way of life in the plantation community, and fights for his individual freedom at the expense of others. Gaines does not stereotype this situation, however, and justifies both the desire of the old-fashioned women to protect their home and the progressive spirit of Marcus, showing the tension within the changing place for African Americans in American society in the nineteen-forties. The women use space for positive changes within the community that lend to the preservation and strengthening of the home. The male characters, often through conquest and crossing of boundaries, neglect the home and destroy it through selfish motives. Gaines shows the complex nature of this struggle through assigning two gender roles to Jim's character. Accepting the burden of being Marcus's caretaker from the strong women in the novel, Jim attempts to protect the community. However, he also comes to admire Marcus's courage and lack of fear, a component that is lacking in his own manhood.

The most authoritative figure in the novel is the elderly Miss Julie Rand. Though Miss Julie cooked in Herbert Marshall's plantation kitchen for most of her life, she judges and

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commands what is best for her community with authority. The grandmother even influences a change in gender roles, as she gives the male head worker the responsibility of looking after her godson, passing on her duty of being Marcus's caretaker. Miss Julie sets up a private meeting with Jim in the sacred space and privacy of her "small, ill-smelling" bedroom (9). The context of their conversation makes the experience an intimate one that impresses itself upon Jim's memory. The nature of his meeting with Miss Julie is personal, overwhelming and memorable. The spiritual nature of the duty is intensified by the pictures on Miss Julie's walls, as Jim notices, "no matter what wall you faced, you saw pictures of Jesus Christ" (10). The room has an odor that also serves to solidify the image of the woman and her bedroom in Jim's memory: "the thing that hit me the most about the room was the odor in there. It was the odor of old people, old clothes, old liniment bottles" (10). Later, in the fields, Jim recalls the smell of Miss Julie's bedroom, thinking "I wanted to hold my breath, but the old lady was looking at me all the time" (11). Her steady gaze communicates her expectations that Jim cannot forget or refuse; it is now his spiritual duty to care for Marcus. Jim asserts the ability that Miss Julie has to make him accept this burden: "The heavier the burden, the longer they look at you. And Miss Julie looked at me a long, long time" (15). Miss Julie tells Jim that he a "very nice person," and then commands: "look after Marcus up there" (11). Through this initial meeting in the bedroom, Miss Julie controls many of Jim's actions throughout the novel, and even influences his gender role, as he assumes the female position of care-taking and mothering for Marcus. This initial conversation in the bedroom establishes the sacred and intimate nature of the bedroom, and, because of its private and intimate nature, the power the room has to feminize the male character.

Jim's character is conflicted between his male and female roles. Jim is a male, and desires to behave like one, yet his conversation with Miss Julie has burdened him with responsibility and

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the task of homemaking for Marcus. Though Jim is commanded by the overseer, Bonbon, to share his small house with Marcus, he gets his command to care for and protect the convict from Miss Julie. At first Jim does not want to deal with Marcus, and thinks about Miss Julie's bossy and assertive nature: "to me she was a little old gangster just like Bonbon was. She was even worse than Bonbon" (14). Jim compares Miss Julie to the male overseer because of the burden that she has now placed on his shoulders. Jim reluctantly participates in homemaking duties for Marcus; he begins to show his care the best way he knows how: he cooks Marcus food.

Much of Jim's care and concern for Marcus is expressed through the provision of shelter, food, paternal advice and proper clothes. The kitchen becomes a room that brings Jim and Marcus together, as it solidifies a relationship and forces communication between the two men. Though Jim does not verbally express care for Marcus, his actions express his attempt to make a home for the boy. Jim continues to cook for Marcus, share his own food, and buy him drinks, which he does not have to do. The space of the kitchen functions as a way to transfer the feminine role of caretaking to Jim.

The state and progress of the new relationship between Jim and Marcus can be seen through the preferences of who chooses to eat what, and where. The bitter, rebellious and hardened nature of Marcus can be seen in the boy's initial distrust and disrespect of Jim, as the boy denies his food. The boy shows his distrust of his own community, even, as he states "I don't need nobody to feed me" (24). However, through time and the consistency of Jim's effort, Marcus begins to trust his caretaker. Jim describes the important scene of the first time Marcus eats at his table: "I went in and washed my face and hands and warmed up some beans and rice I had in the icebox . . . and I sat in the back door eating. After awhile, Marcus came back there. I nodded toward the plate. He washed his hands and sat down at the table" (29). Marcus continues

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to display his bitter distrust and childish disrespect as he asserts: "Just 'cause I'm eating your food don't say I trust you" (30).Through Jim's consistency in supplying nourishment for Marcus, the convict begins to form a friendship with Jim. Much like Grant and Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying,* the personal preferences of where to eat and drink show the progress and status of Jim and Marcus's companionship.

Displaying his feminine role, Jim participates in an act central to Black womanhood by passing along folk-cures to Marcus. Jim practices "Grandma say," as he gives advice to Marcus on how to cure his aches with salt. He also takes time to talk with Marcus, and genuinely listens to the boy. In *Sisters of the Yam,* hooks discusses how the role of "healers" in the African-American community was often delegated to women, and often included conversation and story-telling, or the "talking cure" (8). After talking with Marcus about his life, Jim tells the boy that he can draw the soreness out of his body after a day in the field by putting his hands in salted water (52). As he eats Jim's food, Marcus shows his trust for his new care-taker as he listens and takes Jim's advice quietly. This time spent in the kitchen shows a shift in Marcus's trust for Jim; the convict chooses to befriend the old tractor driver: "Every night when [Marcus] came in, he bathed his hands in salt water to draw out the soreness. By the end of the week his hands and his shoulders had gotten much better" (52). Detecting an ability to trust Jim, Marcus makes himself vulnerable to his roommate. Throughout the rest of the novel Marcus turns to Jim for his help and knows that he can rely on or trust Jim as a friend. Jim's developing care for Marcus becomes evident in a genuine prayer. As he is talking to God, questioning God's existence, he asks for "a little breeze," not for himself, but for Marcus (38). Jim's initial reluctance, tension and frustration with Marcus throughout the novel begin to turn to a mother-like pride for her child.

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Though Jim is a feminine figure in the novel, he struggles with his role. Aunt Margaret is significantly more stable and self-possessed than Jim, an authority on the plantation. Aunt Margaret, who protects her community, tells the truth, and has a realistic view of life, also struggles with keeping silent in order to keep her home a peaceful place. Though Aunt Margaret's devotion to her duties and the peace on the plantation make her seem, at times, like a stereotypical mammy figure, her truth-speaking and sincere care for her community serves to display her commitment "to the survival and wholeness of entire people." Aunt Margaret is not trapped; she has peace and stability in her home, and sincerely cares for her community, even the white overseer's daughter, Tite. Trying to protect the community she and her ancestors have built, Aunt Margaret attempts to stand in the way of Marcus's violent attempts to incite progression and change in the quarters through destruction of the home.

Marcus's presence and disrespect disrupt the way of life on the plantation. There is a difference and conflict between Marcus and the other African Americans on the plantation: being from the city, Marcus does not consider himself the "old-fashioned" black. After a few days on the plantation, Marcus joins Jim and Jobbo out on the porch in the evening as the play music. Listening to the two men sing, Marcus comments on the plantation's culture, "Man this place is black . . . Good Lord" (48). Jobbo, not understanding that this is an insult from Marcus, comments about the time of day: "'Yeah, it's pretty black, alright' Jobbo said, looking around like he hadn't seen it dark like this before" (48). While Jobbo is ignorant of anything being wrong with his lifestyle, Marcus looks down on the plantation life, thinking that it is a shameful way of life. Marcus sees the people on the plantation as trapped as slaves, and he insists repeatedly throughout the novel that he cannot stay. Because he sees the community on the plantation quarters as a failure for the African-American community to progress, and a place of

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entrapment rather than a peaceful home, Marcus attempts to escape using whatever means he can to get away, even through violence or at other people's expense.

Aunt Margaret becomes more than a metaphorical barrier between Marcus and the white overseer's wife, Louise. Trying to prevent chaos in the community, both Jim and Aunt Margaret work together to keep Marcus from crossing social boundaries, which would have violent results. While he is working in Bonbon's yard, Marcus tries to get into the kitchen: "Ya'll got anything cold in there – lemonade or anything?" (153). Aunt Margaret stands in his way, does not invite him in, and "just looked at him" (153). She becomes a physical boundary between the convict and the house. However, when Aunt Margaret goes back to work, Louise helps Marcus hop the fence and sneak inside the house through the bedroom window. Marcus crosses all spatial, personal, and racial boundaries to gain access to the white overseer's wife's room. Knowing the consequences of what would happen to Marcus should he enter a white woman's bedroom, Aunt Margaret treats the event as if the world were ending.

The crossing of these specific spatial boundaries has catastrophic effects for life on the plantation. Knowing that the interracial affair could hurt not only Marcus, Louise, and Bonbon, but Tite and the rest of the community as well, Aunt Margaret treats it as if it were literally the end of the world and cries out to God: "'Master,' she said. 'Master.' She broke inside and started beating on the door with her fist. 'Come out of there, boy,' she said, beating. 'I mean, come out of there, come out of there'" (158). Crossing every boundary, Marcus was now inside the most intimate room of the white man's house. Aunt Margaret knows an intimate spatial boundary has been crossed, and will have significant repercussions within the community. When she realizes that the affair has already begun, Aunt Margaret gives up and goes outside. Not wanting any part of the transgression of boundaries inside the home, Aunt Margaret goes into the yard in order to

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escape the destruction of the private space that is taking place in side of Bonbon's home: "She sat down against one of the big oak trees and pulled Tite in her lap" (161). "Aunt Margaret didn't know how long she sat there. She was facing the house and crying" (162). Holding Bonbon and Louise's child in her lap, Aunt Margaret cries against the tree, not only because she could not keep Marcus outside, but because of the danger that will arise for the whole community out of his entering the white man's home. In her book, hooks asserts that "truth telling" is a key component in powerful womanhood (14). She continues to discuss the harmful effects of lying to oneself: "Dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire" (hooks 15). Aunt Margaret sees that both Marcus and Louise are in denial of the truth, of the consequences of their affair: "[B]oth of them go'n pay for this day" (162). Aunt Margaret is not removed from reality, but acts and speaks on the authority of her own life experience; she speaks the truth to the romantic ideas of the reckless couple. Aunt Margaret also sees that Marcus is being manipulated, as he has lost his original plan to escape by himself, and is now attempting to bring a white woman with him. Aunt Margaret does not verbalize agreement with the social oppression of interracial relationships; however, she knows the reality of the social constructs in the South, and speaks the truth about the destruction of both home and community that their affair will cause.

Aunt Margaret's speech, silence, or actions are founded on the Womanist values of protecting oneself, and protecting or sustaining the community as a whole. Aunt Margaret does not want to oppress Marcus; rather, she wants to protect him, the rest of the community, and herself. Commenting on the difference between herself and Marcus: "'My hand,' she said, looking at the hand that wasn't holding Tite. 'My hand. All they done done all they life was

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housework and clean baby mess – 'cepting little fishing now and then; now I'm old, they got to protect the world.' She looked at Marcus. 'Black trash,' she said quietly" (139). Tite sees Marcus back in the yard, the young girl wants to play with him, and she tells Aunt Margaret, "You in the way" (166). Attempting to protect innocence and preserve her people's way of life on the plantation, Aunt Margaret aims at keeping the peace and stability in the community. She becomes a literal boundary between Marcus and Louise. Compared with Marcus's actions, Aunt Margaret's actions show that the convict has more selfish motives. He does not care about the violence and destruction that his actions will bring about. The means that Marcus uses to progress, or to gain his freedom, are not respectable in Aunt Margaret's eyes. Though Marcus is seemingly fighting oppression for his race, Aunt Margaret considers him "black trash" for the methods Marcus uses to gain that freedom; crossing unlawful personal and social boundaries – methods that afflict others in the quest for his own freedom.

At times Aunt Margaret deliberately chooses to be silent in order to free her hands from having to "protect the world," all the time, or to move herself out of "the way." It is a choice that she makes in order to create a world for herself that gives her the most stability possible in her space. Discussing the necessity for black women to fight stress in their lives, hooks states that "knowing when to quit is linked to knowing one's value" (41). At the end of the novel when Jim is sent away from the plantation for being too involved with Marcus, Aunt Margaret stays. She tells Jim that she "don't know nothing" about what happened with Marcus (279). Going against her pattern of truth-telling, Aunt Margaret is conflicted with the tension of staying silent in order to keep her home. Before Jim leaves, his last view of the plantation is of Aunt Margaret going back to her home, which she has safely and successfully kept throughout all the violence and

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drama. Also showing the complex nature of the characters, Jim's cold nature towards Bonbon hurts the overseer, who genuinely cared for Jim and considered him his friend (278).

Though Marcus's affair with Louise is created by his own desire for revenge against Bonbon and Pauline, his power is reversed as, through time, both Louise and the plantation owner begin to manipulate Marcus through the affair. The white overseer's wife also approaches a boundary, her yard fence, which she never exits, in order to have revenge and to escape: "then Wednesday night when we were coming back down the quarter we saw Louise standing near the gate" (119). Seeing that both Marcus and Louise are interested in crossing these socially set boundaries – Jim contemplates running from his burden: "I stood out in the road a long time, telling myself I ought to get away from here. 'I don't owe that old woman anything,' I said. 'I ought to go pack my bags and get away from here. Sure as hell, that sonofabitch is going to start trouble before all this is over with" (123). Jim would have to escape his home on the plantation to escape the trouble and changes. Jim's tension with Marcus increases out of his care for the boy. Though he joked with Marcus about running away, it becomes a serious matter when white people get involved. Marcus is now being manipulated for both Louise and Marshall's benefit.

Refusing to respect or listen to his community, Marcus continues to try and destroy both Bonbon's home and the home of the plantation. After sleeping with Bonbon's wife, Marcus begins to act out with more confidence. Marcus and Louise even leave the bedroom door opened while they are naked (204). The two lovers have a disregard for who sees them together, almost as if they want to get caught, and Aunt Margaret yells at them for having no sense of shame. Later, Louise makes Aunt Margaret cook for her and Marcus in Bonbon's kitchen: "Aunt Margaret stood by the stove looking at them" (204). Black on black oppression can be seen when Aunt Margaret is forced to serve Marcus dessert and coffee. He makes derogatory noises to Aunt

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Margaret, but obeying the boundaries of her servile position, she does nothing about it: "She looked down at him a moment, but he never raised his head. She moved back to the stove to watch them" (206). Though Aunt Margaret is being degraded, it is Marcus who is characterized by shame as he will not even lift his head to look at Aunt Margaret. Aunt Margaret knows the power of the bounds that society has constructed and speaks reality into their escape plan: "'Ya'll ain't going nowhere,' Aunt Margaret said. 'Ya'll go'n die right here. 'Specially him there'" (207). Speaking out the immature nature of their selfish desires, Aunt Margaret then calls them children. Aunt Margaret knows that their love is unacceptable in society and cannot be taken outside of the private realm of the bedroom, an intimate room that has now become a place of shame.

Though Marcus's plan starts off as a selfish desire for freedom, he eventually becomes the pawn in other people's plans for escape or revenge. Marshall is using Marcus to get rid of Bonbon, and Louise is using Marcus for escape. By allowing himself to be manipulated by these two white characters, Marcus becomes oppressed rather than free. Louise thinks that her desire to escape the plantation can become a reality if Marcus helps her to escape. Thus, Marcus transforms from being a pawn for revenge, to becoming her savior and her personal means of escape. Louise stared across the table adoringly at Marcus: "She worshipped him" (205). Blinded by Louise's adoration and the Marshall's promise of money and escape, Marcus refuses to trust Jim, his mother-figure, and disrespects the commands of Aunt Margaret.

Aunt Margaret's authority is displayed in her command over Bonbon's family. Though Louise is a fully-grown woman, Aunt Margaret is her caretaker and mother; she also raised Louise's daughter, Tite. Louise cannot survive without Margaret. Aunt Margaret comments on Louise's blackface disguise she plans to wear when they leave the plantation: "Louise didn't

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look like a woman, she looked like a child playing with a doll" (241). Determined to let Louise know that she could not change the social status of herself, her child, or Marcus, tells Louise that, even in blackface, her child is "still white" (241). Aunt Margaret: "'Ya'll ain't around Yankees, Miss Louise'" (244). Louise displays her child-like immaturity and ignorance of reality as she does not even know that if she makes the sandwiches too early they will spoil (245). After Louise refuses to heed Aunt Margaret's warning, Margaret helps Louise prepare to leave, all the time knowing that Louise and Marcus would not make it past the plantation boundaries. Aunt Margaret knows that the childlike aggression of Marcus, and the careless nature of his relationship with Louise are not respectable methods of gaining power in society.

Displaying the feminine role of establishing and keeping boundaries, Bishop is a male character in the novel who finds his strength and identity in the task of homemaking and keeping. Unable to function outside of this role, Bishop attempts to preserve his place on the plantation by directing Marcus to his correct place on the plantation: "'Go back down the quarter, boy,' Bishop said. 'Please go back down the quarter.' 'Nigger, Marshall in that house?' Marcus said. 'Mr. Marshall's in there,' Bishop said. 'He's in his library, relaxing. But please go back down the quarter, boy. Please go" (210). Bishop tries to shut the door on Marcus, literally blocking him from the house, "But Marcus expected something like that and stuck his foot in the way" (210). Refusing to let the convict disrupt Marshall, "Bishop leaned over and tried to move the foot with his hands" (211). To get away from Bishop, Marcus asks to speak with Marshall in private, and Marshall agrees and the two men leave the kitchen as Bishop fails to stop them both from going to the library: "Neither one of them looked back at him" (212). Bishop has failed to protect his safety and stability in the kitchen by failing to stop Marcus from entering the library with Marshall.

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Threatened by Marcus's presence at the big house, Bishop goes down the quarter to get the support of his community. Jim comments on Bishop's appearance outside of his kitchen: "I had never seen him this far in the quarter before" (213). Following Jim into his little plantation kitchen, Aunt Margaret tells Jim why Bishop has come so far down the quarter: "[T]hat boy went up there" (214). Jim does not believe her, but Bishop confirms the boy's presence in the white man's house: "'Yes,' Bishop said, wiping his face and neck. 'He came there Thursday night'" (215). Though Bishop wants to protect himself and his position, he also displays a concern for his community and a respect for the work his ancestors put into building their home: "He just pushed his foot in there . . . The house his great-grandparents built. The house slavery built. He pushed his foot in that door" (215). Jim is uncomfortable under Bishop's gaze: "He wanted me to know what it meant for Marcus to push his foot through a door that slavery had built" (215). Marcus is not just disregarding social boundaries set by white men, but he is betraying his own community. Marcus is open about his rejection of community: "When they let me out of jail, I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do for myself. And nobody in this world need to expect no more from me than that . . . No matter what they say, it don't add up to nothing but a big pile of shit. You do what you can do for yourself, and that's all" (253). Jim knows the danger as he thinks to himself: "Bishop wanted me to understand that any black person who would stick his foot in a door that slavery built would do almost anything" (216). Jim begins to believe that Marcus would do something as crazy as go to a white man's house and ask for money to kill another white man: "I believed him because I remembered he had fooled that dog and jumped through that window to get to Bonbon's wife" (223). Marcus had the experience in crossing boundaries; his confidence disregarding the private sphere and the intimacy of other's homes was growing.

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This crossing of new social boundaries threatens Bishop in that the butler gets his strength from the "big house": "Bishop went to church every Sunday, but he didn't look to God for his strength. He looked to that big house up the quarter. And right now that big house wasn't setting on very solid ground" (222). Lacking the strength that the deeply spiritual females on the plantation have, Bishop quietly accepts his place in society, and strives to protect it because it is his God. Jim comments on seeing Bishop in his white suit walking around the big house: "Bishop dressed all in white looked like a ghost around that old house" (233). Even when Bishop's own life is in danger, he prays for the house (237). To Bishop, the big house means more than his own life; it is his entire world. Outside of this place in the big house, Bishop has no where to escape: "He couldn't run because he didn't know where to go. There wasn't any place for him to go. This house and this yard was the only place he had" (267). Gaines portrays Bishop as a character who has become so defined by his place in society that he could not survive in freedom. His refusal even to walk down to the other end of the plantation and associate with the community shows that he would not know how to inhabit other spaces outside of the big house.

Jim's frustration with Marcus throughout the novel increases when the convict plans to escape; however, it is not because of Marcus's desire to be free that Jim is upset, but the way that Marcus is being manipulated by Marshall and Louise. Jim lets Marcus know why his attempt to escape the plantation with a white woman will not work: "'Because Bonbon own people'll kill him if he don't. Because this is the South, and the South ain't go'n let no nigger run away with no white woman and let that white husband walk around here scot-free. Not the South'" (224). Jim asks Marcus why he does not care that he is upsetting the social constructs on the plantation, thus upsetting the peace. Marcus responds that he is out to protect himself: "'You don't care if

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the whole world burn down, do you? Do you, Marcus?' 'Long as I ain't caught in the flame, Jim,' he said" (225). Though Marcus might not be able to pull off escaping the plantation by himself, he would be able to cross those boundaries with the help of the white man, "the law" (224). When Marshall, the plantation owner, crosses spatial boundaries to come to Marcus, the dream of Marcus's escape becomes a reality. Whether it is successful or not does not matter; Marcus will attempt an escape. "Monday, about five o'clock, Marshall Herbert showed up in the field for the first time" (226). Jim does not like that Marshall has come so far down the quarter and knows it is to stir up trouble; he shows annoyance at Marshall's presence "Why wasn't he at the front sitting on his gallery drinking like he always do?" (227). Much like when Louise came to the fence to see Marcus, Marshall crosses social boundaries on the plantation for his own personal gain.

Jim's conflicted feelings about Marcus are displayed in their last meal together. In his last moments with Marcus, Jim toasts the convict, his friend and, at times, his child: "'Here's to you,' I said, raising my bottle" (260). However, Jim still thinks Marcus is going about his escape with the wrong methods and, trying to look out for Marcus, he asks the boy to leave without Louise. Marcus, though seemingly unsure, insists he loves Louise and wants her to get away too (260). Marcus empathizes with her: "She told me herself she ain't been out of that yard in over a year" (261). Knowing that Marcus is in danger, Jim realizes that no matter what he says, the boy will not listen. Choosing to keep what friendship he has with the convict, Jim stares at the young boy quietly, promising to come in early the next day and see him off: "We shook hands. He squeezed my hand pretty hard" (262). Jim's sympathy with the boy comes out of his realization that, controlled by social boundaries, Marcus was merely "a tool," and had not wanted to ever kill anyone (269). Jim then admits his change of feelings towards the convict: "'No I didn't blame

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Marcus anymore. I admired Marcus. I admired his great courage' . . . 'I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. He was the bravest man I knew, the bravest man I had ever met'" (270). Jim's admiration of Marcus displays his respect for a courage and conquest that he does not possess within himself. It is at this point in the novel that Jim loses his maternal desire to protect Marcus, and releases the boy as his burden, letting him attempt an escape with Louise.

Now free from his female role, Jim views Marcus as courageous, a male quality that he lacks. However, though Jim admires Marcus's spirit of conquest, the romantic desires that Louise and Marcus have to escape are still violently ended by Bonbon. When Jim gets back to the plantation later that night, he pulls up to Bonbon's house and sees that it is dark, and that Marcus is lying on the ground "black with blood" (272). This picture of his identity as inescapable is significant in comparison to Jim's first sight of the boy, which leaves him unable to determine Marcus's race: "I looked toward the road and I saw somebody coming in the gate. It was too dark to tell if he was white or colored" (3). Though Marcus may have tried to escape his role in society, his selfish methods lead him to death. Though Jim may respect Marcus's desire and drive in the face of an oppressive society, he never condoned the destructive effect it had on the plantation community.

Gaines depicts the unjust reality of racially oppressive social constructs as Bonbon leaves the plantation, and Pauline follows him a few days later (278). Though Marcus is dead and Louise is sent to an insane asylum, Bonbon is free (278). A few days later, Marshall Herbert calls Jim to his library, and subtly threatens Jim: "'You better leave from here,' he said. 'Yes sir, I was thinking about that myself,' I said" (278). During Jim's last supper with Aunt Margaret, he asks her how she will stay on the plantation, how she will forget what happened; she responds that she has already moved on: "'When you live long as I done lived, you learn to forget things quite

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easy,' she said" (279). As Jim leaves the plantation for the unknown, he turns to see Aunt Margaret "going back home" (281). However, because Jim was so close to Marcus, he knows too much and is a threat to the peace on the plantation.

Gaines uses the well-defined spaces of the plantation to show the power struggles and shifts between the male and female gender. The male characters in the novel are characterized with a quality of flight and conquest. It is the female figures that offer stability, life, direction, and spirituality. The female characters both build the home and protect it; their attention to the private sphere is not a sign of oppression, but of creativity, strength and authority over themselves and their community.

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Chapter Three: The Faith of the Female and Responsibility Within the Home in *In My Father's House*

In My Father's House is a novel about male neglect of the domestic sphere, and by extension, of the family unit. Because the home is a foundational part of a thriving human existence, an unstable home-life can often produce negative results on the family members, especially the children. In *The Power of Place,* Winifred Gallagher asserts the necessity of stability in the earliest stages of developing life: "Collaborations between brains and environments . . . begin at the earliest stages of life, in the surprisingly complex world of the womb" (98). She continues, "we work hard to keep our settings predictable" (129). Etienne is the Reverend Phillip's bastard son who, being abandoned by his father, has a life of poverty and unpredictability. Phillip's absence has been a "negative presence" in the boy's life that fills him with anger (Ardener 13); Etienne has no feelings for his father other than bitterness for the neglect he has shown his family. In contrast to his son's poor quality of life, Etienne's absence from Phillip's home allows the reverend to forget about his troubled and impoverished past. Now a powerful Civil Rights leader, Phillip has a new family and an established identity; he has the predictability of environment that Etienne lacks. Gaines contrasts the oppression the African-American community faces in society with the "Black on Black oppression" within the domestic sphere, and shows how discord within the home will prevent progress in the public world.

Gaines's focus on male neglect within the home, and the emotional space and distance between fathers and sons, is significant in that the story is set during the Civil-Rights era, just at the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s era. Even if the African-American community has gained space at a lunch counter, the negative presence of empty spaces between fathers and their families is still affecting the community as a whole. Gaines's novel focuses on this quiet struggle

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within the privacy of the home, and the fight that women had to wage against the absent father-figure. The Womanist desire to create and protect the home and the community is a catalyst for the female figures in this novel to address the issue of male neglect within their community, and bring restoration to homes and families.

Gaines portrays the absence of a father figure as having devastating effects on the family unit. Unprotected from poverty, rape, hunger, and violence, Phillip's old family suffers without his presence. Without the father's wealth for support, the neglected family is separated from Phillip not only through space, but through social class, as they live in poverty. Etienne spends most of his life in a crypt-like bedroom until he searches for his father in order to kill him. When Etienne arrives in town, his presence in Phillip's living room de-centers the reverend's identity so radically that he passes out. The social definition of the black man, Phillip says, caused him to "stay on the floor," and made him less of a man (202). Etienne's presence brings along memories and a burden that begins to destroy Phillip's new identity, which is built on lies; it forces Phillip to reconcile his new family with the family he started in his reckless youth, and has since neglected all of his life. All of the hurt and death that characterizes Etienne becomes a part of Phillip's current life.

Gaines makes his most explicit statement concerning male neglect within his ethnic community, and its destructive effects on the home, through Phillip's character. Phillip is a well-respected Civil Rights leader and minister who has neglected the family he started in his youth. Now living in supposed abundance, Phillip's old son, Etienne, comes to reveal the destruction his father's neglect has caused in his life. Etienne comes to the minister's home and sees how wealthy his father is. Phillip's present-day home is one that communicates wealth and abundance: "His ranch-style brick house was the most expensive and elegant owned by a black

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family in St. Adrienne . . . The minister's big Chrysler and his wife's smaller station wagon were parked there" (28). Etienne's first visit to his father's house is during a party for the minister's Civil Rights campaigning. Shepherd, a family friend, points out the boys own father to him: "Over there by the piano . . . Big man in the dark suit, talking to the white folks. King Martin himself" (30). Phillip is described as a strong and powerful, almost indestructible looking man: "Phillip Martin wore a black pinstriped suit, a light gray shirt, and a red polka-dot tie. He was sixty years old, just over six feet tall, and he weighed around two hundred pounds . . . admired by women, black and white" (34). He was a powerful figure in the community and "no one ever questioned his position as leader of the civil rights movement in the parish" (35). Phillip's wealth was apparent without words. Etienne responds with obvious psychological trauma, trembling with sweat, uncomfortable in his own father's extravagant home.

Phillip's initial recognition of Etienne begins the power shift in the home. Phillip gradually loses social status and power within his own home throughout the rest of the novel. As Phillip loses power, his friends, family, and his wife all gain authority over him. When Phillip first notices Etienne in his house, he can no longer stand: "He pushed his way out of the crowd and started across the room. He had taken only two or three steps when he suddenly staggered and fell heavily to the floor" (40). Etienne's presence becomes a weight on Phillip. The minister, collapsed on the floor, now lay under his own son's gaze: "[Etienne's] reddish eyes narrowed, his face trembled as he stared down at him. It seemed for a moment that he might say something, maybe even scream, but he jerked away from the crowd and went out" (41). Phillip's son is the only one to leave Phillip's side after the preacher collapses. Regaining consciousness, Phillip begs to be let up: "Please let me up. I have to get up. Don't let me deny him again" (41). This moment in the living room is where the balance of power between the father and son begins to

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shift. After this exchange, Phillip's busy home is "deadly quiet" (43). At the end of the novel, Phillip's identity has been so completely destroyed that he only has enough strength to climb off of the floor again and into his wife's arms. As Phillip's social status and pious image is destroyed by his past sin, the power in the home is shifted to Alma.

Though Phillip is seemingly the dominant character, it is his wife, Alma, who is the stability and strength of the family. Not only has Phillip neglected his old family, but he is guilty of abandoning his new family within his own home. His marriage is troubled by his own absence from the kitchen and bedroom, the two rooms where his wife spends most of her time. Phillip cannot escape his illegitimate children, and he cannot escape the damage he is causing to his present family by ignoring them and throwing himself into his religious and political work. As Phillip experiences an undoing and radical change in perspective, his wife Alma does not abandon him. However, Alma defies passivity by "truth telling" as she demands a change in Phillip's actions. Though she is burdened and hurt by her husband, she supports him through his trials. Alma is not powerless or subdued, but strives to protect her home confidently and quietly.

Also an example of Womanist values, Virginia Colar is an authoritative female figure in the novel who provides for and protects her community by running a boarding house. When Etienne comes back to town, he goes to her house, not his father's, to look for a place to stay: "'You got rooms?' he asked her" (3). Wanting to say no because of his ragged looks, Virginia is tempted to shut the door on him; however, she repetitively wonders to herself: "[W]here else would he go?" (4). Unlike Phillip, Virginia is concerned about where the boy will sleep at night. Although she is of no relation to the boy, Virginia cares more for him than his own father by providing for him within his first few minutes at her home: "She thought about her tenant upstairs in number four, and she wondered if he was hungry. She didn't serve food at the house,

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but she had cooked much more than she would ever eat. If she ate soup every day for a week, there would still be some left over" (8). Virginia provides the room and food for the bastard son that is not her own (9). She is the strong black woman with a kitchen that provides strength and stability for her community.

The effects of Phillip's neglect can be seen through the state of Etienne's room at Virginia's boarding house. The rented bedroom displays how Etienne is shrouded in depression and hopelessness. When Shepherd comes to pick Etienne, who calls himself "Robert X" upon his arrival into Phillip's town, he is disgusted by what he sees: "The room stank with the odor of cheap wine. Now Shepherd wished he had stayed out in the hall" (25). Standing at the window, Etienne describes his own soul symbolically, through what was in the alley below: "'My soul don't feel good,' he said as he stared down at the alley that ran alongside the building. 'Like garbage, broke glass, tin cans. Any trash' (25). Etienne identifies not with other human beings, but with the trash and the alley below the window. When Shepherd tries to comfort the tenant by telling him to go back home, Etienne responds with a question: "Home?" (26). When Shepherd asks where he came from, then, if he did not come from a home, Etienne replies that he came from "[a] prison" (26). Separated from his father, from a good home, from money and health and wellness, Etienne's home with his poor mother and siblings was a prison, and his soul was as dead as the alley below – in ruins: "'It all adds up to the same thing,' the tenant said. 'No matter what you do, no matter how hard you work, how much you love, they catch you off guard one day and break you. It don't matter if you're glass and tin, or meat and bone. It don't matter'" (27). When Shepherd tells him he needs to see a preacher, Etienne laughs at the irony, as his own father is a reverend. The effect of Phillip's denial of his own son from his home is synonymous with condemning the boy to death; Etienne's personal space of the bedroom is a coffin.

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Participating in what hooks describes as the "talking cure," Phillip has a moment of confession with Alma in their front yard. When Phillip goes to watch for Etienne by his gate, he begins to realize his neglect of his family: "When Phillip came to the other end of the yard at the side of the house, he looked out toward the street. But a tall cypress gate between the house and the fence blocked that street from him. He stared at the gate now as if someone or something had put it there that very moment to keep him from seeing the boy" (73). Now frustrated at the separation from his own son, Phillip ignores Alma's pleas for him to come inside the house: "He shook the gate hard with both hands. But the gate of cypress was too solidly built to rattle . . . He slammed his weight against it, then turned quickly away" (73). Phillip's new hatred for the gate in his yard is symbolic of his estrangement from his son. As Phillip associates the gate with the distance between his son and himself, he admits to Alma he wants to tear the gate down. When she asks him why, Phillip responds: "Cause I put it there" (73). Phillip confesses his own transgression of isolating and neglecting his son. The gate has become a boundary for Phillip between his old and his new life, and he is beginning to regret that he ever built it in the first place. By denying his son space in his home, Phillip has denied his son the necessities of life. Longing to see Etienne walking around the street, Phillip stands at the gate shaking it and crying. Because the gate keeps Phillip secluded from the street, it represents literal estrangement from his son. However, Phillip's overreaction to the placement of the gate shows its symbolic meaning of the division that Phillip has created with his son through the neglect of his son.

Phillip's controlling presence and his neglect of the family begins to weaken and change as his burden forces him to be confined to the home. Within Alma's domestic sphere, Phillip engages in power play with his wife. Rather than share his burden with his wife, Phillip escapes his family by going to his study, his private space, to think. Alma intrudes upon Phillip's space

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and demands that he be kept on bed-rest. Angry that he is confined to her space, the bedroom and the kitchen, Phillip expresses his frustration and tries to get her to leave the home: "'No reason for you to stay here today,' he said" (47). However, as long as she remains in the house he listens to her. When his wife finally leaves the house, Phillip takes Alma's absence as an opportunity to leave his bedroom: "[H]e hurried across the hall into his office" (52). Phillip's own personal room is where he tries to figure out his own shameful secret. The office is a safe haven from the rest of the family where Phillip can be alone to think, and to escape the demands of his wife.

Phillip's absence from the kitchen and bedroom signifies the estrangement he has from his wife. Phillip is rarely in the kitchen, yet he spends time everywhere else, working on his Civil Rights campaign. When he goes to either the kitchen or the bedroom it is for food or sex – his needs. At times Alma seems as if she is passive, due to the fact that she is a small, quiet woman; when she is disregarded it does not surprise her: "Most people usually ignored her and worshipped her husband" (29). However, she exhibits wisdom and stability throughout the novel. As Phillip's strength decreases, her strength increases. She cares for him while he is sick, directs his affairs at the church, and, as she begins to find out about his past life, she keeps the conversations about Etienne confined to the private realm of their bedroom in order to protect Phillip's image.

Alma uses the space of the bedroom to confront Phillip and have intimate conversations; not wanting to embarrass him publicly, Alma carefully chooses where to vent her frustrations. Phillip will try to use the bedroom for sex, to get closer to his wife, whom he neglects during the day. After hearing that Phillip has invited people over when he is supposed to be resting, she tells Phillip that she is angry over his demeaning treatment of her, and his refusal to ask her about the use of the space that they supposedly share as a home: "This is my house too. Ask me sometime,

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Phillip" (68). Alma then draws an invisible boundary between herself and Phillip: "She undressed, then got into bed, facing the wall. He lay down beside her and tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't answer" (68). Phillip begins to realize that he is separated from his wife. The next day in the kitchen, Phillip tries to get Alma to sleep with him; responding to his joke with loving yet sad tone, Alma vents her frustration again: "I want you to come to me sometime, Phillip" (71). Alma tells Phillip to stop neglecting his home, her, and their children. When she tells Phillip she wants him to count on her for more than sex, he replies that his world and his job are too dangerous for her: "'I don't want you mixed up out there,' he said . . . 'I want you in here,'" (71). Refusing to passively accept his supposed attempt to protect her by not involving her in his public life, Alma argues: "That's my job, too, Phillip" (71). "'I'm in here all the time,' she said. 'But you don't come to me. You go in that room. You go out there in the yard. I'm in here – but you never come to me'" (71). Alma asserts her strength as she voices reasonable demands for a change in Phillip's behavior, and rather than escaping her, Phillip begins to listen. Phillip's developing identity can be seen in the changing ways he views and treats his present-day family. As the novel progresses, Phillip's attitude towards Alma changes drastically, until he eventually becomes completely dependent on her for survival.

Phillip's journey to reconcile with Etienne becomes a humbling spiritual quest for the Reverend that ends up affecting all of the relationships in his life. When Etienne gets arrested for walking around town, Phillip bails his son out of jail and attempts to reconcile with him. The white police officer, Nolan, questions Phillip mockingly about his son's absence from his own house. Nolan then threatens Phillip, telling him he can only bail his son out of jail if he agrees to stop his protest scheduled for that Friday (89). When Phillip chooses to trade his "people" for his son in the jail cell he begins his journey back into his old life. Phillip sacrifices all that he has

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built for himself in his new life, and even his position as the Civil Rights leader of his town, to get his son back. The white police chief, Nolan, does not believe that Virginia's tenant is Phillip's son: "'Let's start all over,' Nolan said. 'Let's start with why he's staying at Virginia's and not with you. Look to me like he ought to be in his father's house.' . . . 'he's not staying there? Why? No room?'" (87). Phillip is threatened by Nolan and tormented at the idea of choosing between his people and his son: "Why you doing this to me?' he asked. 'Why you persecuting me?'" (91). This element of suffering shows how Phillip's attempt to reconcile with his son has become a spiritual journey for him. Only Phillip's agreement to stop his protest, the sum of all that he has worked for in his campaigns, will keep his son from going back to his jail cell. This act of self-sacrifice becomes a symbol of Phillip's newly developing humility and desire for reconciliation, a change that Alma has insisted he make.

Phillip and Etienne's first conversation takes place in the isolated and transitory space of the car. In the car, Phillip and his son are away from other people and places in the town; they are free to talk. Etienne tells Phillip that he has come for revenge: "For destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister" (99). His son begins to pour out his anger and hurt as they drive. Phillip turns for help: "He looked around as if he were looking for someone to help him. But no one else was there, and he turned back to his son" (99). Unlike the time he fell in his living room, Phillip was alone in the car with his burden wholly upon himself. Phillip then blames his inadequacy as a father on society:

> It took a man to do these things, and I wasn't a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill – but not stand. Not be responsible. Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That's what kept me on that bed . . . I wanted to get up more than anything in the

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> world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had lived by for so long, and I wasn't strong enough to break them then. (102)

Phillip's attempt to blame his neglect on society's definition of the black man does not satisfy Etienne. Growing up in an impoverished and unstable environment, Etienne tells Phillip that to him, there is no God, no father, and no law (104). Phillip's attempt to bring the boy home fails; the boy leaves him: "Phillip watched him go farther and farther across the fields. When his coat became the same color as the trees, Phillip turned, his head down, and went back to the car" (105). Not knowing where to go, Phillip does not get out of his car until he reaches his godmother's house, "but now he was ashamed to go inside" (106). Phillip's absence from his old home and old life for so long makes his return shameful. The reverend searches for stability and meaning in his godmother's old home. Phillip loses his composure and image of piety as he begins to drink. Becoming intoxicated, Phillip displays his emotional instability as his life begins to unravel. Phillip's godmother knows something must be wrong and, desiring to protect him, she tells Phillip to go home.

Not only does Phillip feel shame returning to visit his old home and his godmother, he has to face a shameful situation when he goes back to his new home with Alma in St. Adrienne. Hearing about their Civil Rights demonstration being cancelled, the committee members come to Phillip's house and wait in his living room. Phillip must tell them about the deal he made with Nolan in order to get his son out of jail. Much different than the first scene in his living room, where Phillip stood in great wealth and power by his piano, Phillip now stands in shame. He is disrespected in his home and he is even voted out of his position as the committee's president. After he is voted out for choosing his son over the Chenal battle, Phillip yells at his old friends: "Tell them why I got my son out of jail. I just wanted to know his name" (132). Mills, an old

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friend of Phillip's, has a hard time leaving the minister's living room: "Mills didn't move. He felt very bad. He felt very tired. He walked out of the front door, wondering if he and the others had done the right thing" (132). Unable to process what has happened in his own home, Phillip retreats to his study to drink a bottle of wine. Phillip wonders to himself: "How can I stand in my own house and let them bastards tell me I'm not fit to run this thing? . . . I shoulda knocked the hell out of Jonathan and throwed him and his little fit ass out of my house . . . And surely I didn't stand in my own house and listen to that crap. No, I must still be on that floor" (133). However, Phillip knows the decision has cost him his job and possibly his place in his new life altogether.

Unable to take hearing the news of Phillip's betrayal of his committee and news of his son in front of a living room full of people, Alma runs to the bedroom: "Alma, who had been listening to all of this as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing, covered her face with her hands and left the room crying. But only Phillip noticed her leaving" (120). Phillip tends to ignore Alma, her actions, and her position or place in the novel; however, as he has already drastically changed since his son came into town, Phillip now notices her leaving the room, even in the middle of his meeting.

After his committee members leave, the quietness of the house also makes him notice Alma and the children's absence (133). Phillip, now removed from the powerful position he had as leader of the Civil Rights campaign, finally goes to seek help from his wife. He tries to excuse his inability to seek her out by saying that he did not know how to approach her: "'I didn't know if you'd understand.' 'That's how it's always been, she said.' 'You come to me for this bed, for nothing else'" (134). Alma tells Phillip of her frustration at his attempt to keep her in the role of housekeeping and protecting his image, and limiting her to that role: "'That is true Phillip. For

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this bed. Cook your food. Follow you to that church. That's all you married me for. You never come to me for any kind of problem" (134-5). Alma practices hooks's method of "truth-telling" as she is honest with Phillip about her frustrations with his pride. She tells Phillip that his "actions" have been communicating her unimportance since they married. His absence from the kitchen or the bedroom, unless he wants food or sex, shows Alma her place in his life. This moment of confrontation leads Phillip to have a desire to change and to take responsibility for reconnecting with Etienne. Phillip's desire to reconnect with his son eventually leads him to the realization that he has also neglected Alma and their children, and he begins to attempt a sincere reconciliation with his present-day family.

Wanting to restore whatever he can with his son in hopes of getting answers about Johanna and the three children they had together, Phillip goes back to his old hometown to find his friend Chippo. When Phillip gets there he sees how run down it all is: "But the place had changed. Twenty years ago it was lively, now it was dead" (140). Phillip's return to old places in his life often reveal dilapidated or run-down houses, a life covered in death. As he drives through his home-town, a notable change can be seen in Phillip. The once proud and self-important man continually thinks about his children back home: "He thought about Alma and the children in St. Adrienne, and he knew he had to hurry and find Chippo and go back to them" (142). Perhaps what is driving Phillip is a realization that he cannot go back to his new home until he makes past with his old life, and so he continues his search for Chippo: "He thought about his own children at home that he could not go to" (145). Seeing the death of his old town and his first life in ruins, Phillip seems to have developed a genuine desire to change his ways and love his new family properly: "How was he ever going to make it up to Alma and the children? How was he ever going to make it up to his church?" (149-50). Phillip fears this same destruction for his new

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family; his disregard for Alma and the children is replaced by genuine desire to return to them and be present in their lives.

Phillip's reason for finding Etienne seems to have become a quest that is about more than just reconciling with his son. At "Dettie's Dinette" Phillip meets an old man named Reverend Peters (151). The two Reverends use the diner as a place to discuss deeply spiritual matters that are not being addressed within the African-American community. Hearing of Phillip's search, the old man "covered Phillip's hand on the table with his own. The skin of his long brown fingers was the same color as the leather of his Bible, and just as wrinkled" (152). Peters tells Phillip to have faith, to which Phillip responds despondently: "'There's a gap between us and our sons, Peters, that even He,' Phillip said, nodding toward the Bible, 'even He can't seem to close'" (154). Through his journey away from his new home and into his old life, Phillip's concerns turn from Civil Right's movements to the problem in his own community of physical space and emotional distance between fathers and sons.

Phillip's guilt for neglecting the domestic space of the home deepens when he meets a young boy named Billy and agrees to give the young man a ride. Phillip's uses his time in the car with Billy to try and figure out the last car ride he had with his own son, and he begins to see the gap between father's and sons more clearly. Billy tells Phillip his solution is to burn "this country down" (162). Billy says his frustration is with the "old-ass niggers" who do not take anything seriously (163). Phillip, referring to the space between fathers and sons, asks Billy his opinion: "What ever happened between us?" (165). Billy says he does not remember when the gap came. Phillip asks if the church would close that gap, to which Billy responds: "Shit" (166). Billy is just as separated from the church as he is his father: "There ain't nothing in them churches, Pops, but more separation. Every little church got they own little crowd, like gangs out

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on the street. They all got to outdo the other one. Don't look for that crowd to close no gap" (166). Billy argues that changing the spaces at lunch counters and bus stops so that African Americans had access did not change the fact that they were still hungry, that the fathers were still not coming home with the money. Dropping him off at another bar, Phillip is quiet and tells the boy to have caution, thinking still of his own son and what he could do to fix the gap: "He was still thinking about Billy, comparing him to his own son in St. Adrienne. They were about the same age, and they were saying practically the same thing . . . by their actions they showed that they felt the same way about God, Law, and Country. He asked himself how would he ever reach them – could he ever reach them?" (170). Phillip admits to an old friend that he is "at war" with himself, and that he is at war with his soul (178). The woman tries to comfort him by telling Phillip to come home with her. He refuses the offer, a choice which shows his genuine desire to change and be good to his new family; he tells her no and goes to Chippo's house to wait (179). Phillip then ends his search around town and falls asleep waiting for his old friend.

Phillip's progress can be seen in his willingness and ability to have conversations. From his troubled arguments with Alma, his meeting with the old reverend, and his heart to heart with Billy, Phillip's concern for others has genuinely continued to grow. Phillip's actions exhibit the practice of what hooks calls the "talking cure" (hooks 8). In his essay "Dying as the last stage of Growth," Mwalimu Imara states that "we seldom think of conversation as commitment, but it is," he continues, "it is equally difficult to listen" (150). Desperate to find answers before he can go back to his new home, Phillip sleeps in a chair waiting for Chippo. When Chippo returns home, they begin drinking and discussing Chippo's trip out to see Phillip's old family. The old friend then mentions Phillip's son's name; for the first time Phillip remembers that his old son is named "Etienne": "Phillip moaned deep in his chest and covered his face with both hands" (182).

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Phillip then finds out about the nature of Etienne's existence, and the room that his son lived in: Etienne and his mother lived in an impoverished home, and Etienne's room, much like his space at Virginia Colar's, was not much more than a coffin. Etienne was given the responsibility of caring for his family, a burden too much for him to bear. Etienne fails to protect his sister from rape or to provide for his mother, so he retires to live in his crypt-like bedroom as if he was dead. Chippo describes his meeting with Johanna at her house when he visits for dinner, and when he mentions where Phillip now preaches, he hears Etienne for the first time:

> I told her, 'St. Adrienne.' That's when I heard the noise – the bed. I had thought all the time it wasn't nobody in the house but me and her . . . till I mentioned where you was preaching. That's what I heard the bed. Like somebody had been laying in one place a long, long time – and when he heard what I said he turned over. No sound from him himself, just the screeching of the bed when he turned over. (191)

Etienne's failure to protect his sister and to prevent his younger brother's murder of the rapist takes away his status as head of the family; in shame he retreats to his crypt: "He wasn't the man of the house no more, and he didn't want to act like he was" (199). Etienne could not act as the man of the house because Phillip had never been present in his life or home to show him how. Phillip tries to reconcile what he is hearing with the face of his son. Chippo ends his confession relieved: "'I feel good about it. Yes. Like somebody done gone to confession.' Phillip looked at him. 'That's how you feel?' 'Exactly,' Chippo said. Phillip nodded his head. 'I see,' he said. 'I see. It musta been a heavy burden to carry, Chippo'" (199). Chippo's shotgun house in the ghetto becomes a holy place for Phillip, where he gets the answers to his searching. This scene of

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intimate conversation between Phillip and Chippo displays Phillip's growing capacity for commitment and conversation

Phillip's discussion with Chippo is another step in his journey to reconcile with his son, which will not be complete until he finds Etienne and calls him by his name. Now carrying the burden of his son's name and the details of his past, Phillip prepares to leave the ghetto and go back to Alma. Once again Phillip's concerns move from his Civil Rights campaign to the underlying problems in his own community: "When will we stand up and tell our people the truth? When will we make our legs go to our sons and make our arms protect our sons?" (202). Seemingly disillusioned with his political progress in life, Phillip sees his failure to correct even larger problems in society, and within his own race. Remembering the young revolutionary, Billy, Phillip further confesses: "[Billy] told me the Civil Rights movement ain't done a thing. Ain't done a thing, 'cause him and his father and me and my boy ain't no closer than we ever was" (202). Phillip admits that his political concerns were outside the home, and that he had failed to see the destruction he had brought to his own community. Phillip also admits his own failure to reject society's oppressive labels upon black men: "I was telling my boy today what keep up apart is a paralysis we inherited from slavery. Paralysis kept me on that bed that day he knocked on that door. Paralysis kept me on that floor . . . How do you shake it off?" (202). Phillip desires to reject the oppressive stereotypes places on black men and to stop oppressing his own family through neglect.

While Phillip is having his moment of realization and confession, and expresses his desire to "get up off the floor" in order to reconcile with his son, Alma and some friends come to Chippo's home with news that Etienne has committed suicide (203). Going into a fit of disbelief and rage, Phillip begins to hurt all those who are near him: "'I got grief in me, Chippo,' Phillip

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told him. 'I got grief in me, and I got fury in me'" (206). Losing his last bit of respectability, the Reverend tells his wife he is going to a whore and fist fights with Chippo and Shepherd to try and get through the door. Giving up on everything, Phillip falls to the floor: "'Nobody know how this nigger feels,' Phillip said gazing down at the floor, his big arms hanging down between his legs the way a defeated fighter's arms would hang. 'You work, you work – what good it do? You bust your ass – what good it do? Man and God, both in one day, tell you go to hell, go fuck yourself'" (207). Completely stripped of all confidence, status, and pride, Phillip even confesses that he wants to give up his faith. Kneeling on the floor of Chippo's crack house, Phillip pours out his bitterness at God: "'How come He let this happen? How come He stood by me all these years, but not today? . . . Why he give me all that strength, that courage to do all them other things, and when I asked Him for my boy--' He stopped. His mouth trembled. Tears came into his eyes. 'Why didn't he hear me, Chippo?'" (209). On Chippo's floor, Phillip becomes the neglected son. The reversal of his entire life brings him to this point of breaking down.

After Phillip's breakdown, the only authoritative characters are the women in the room. Beverly, Shepard's girlfriend actually begins to preach to the Reverend, and remind him of the good works he had done for his community. Beverly comes to Phillip first, gently touching his hand, and giving him directions "to go back" to St. Adrienne, to his new family and his church (210-11). Beverly begins "truth-telling" to remind Phillip of all the good he has done in his church and in his Civil-Rights protests. Phillip does not argue with Beverly, who is redefining his hopeless situation: "He didn't know how to answer her. He didn't like the way she was turning things around" (213). Picking up Phillip's hand before she leaves Chippo's, Beverly tells him "These hands belong to a fighter" (213). It is when Phillip hears his wife turn over on Chippo's bed in the other room that he decides to stand up. Both Shepard's girlfriend and Alma

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remind Phillip of what God has allowed him to accomplish in the present-day, despite his sinful past; the women remind Phillip of the hope he has given others and the hope he should continue to have.

The difference between Phillip's home at the beginning of the novel, and his pitiful position at the end of the novel show the transformation of his character. The last scene of the novel place Phillip and Alma lying on top of someone else's bed in an impoverished neighborhood where no one knows them. Contrasted starkly to his place of power at home at the beginning of the story, Phillip's final decision to get up and go lay on Chippo's bed next to Alma shows his transformation:

> Phillip sat there watching the door a long time after Chippo had gone. Finally he had pushed himself up and went out into the other room. 'Everybody's gone?' Alma asked him. 'Yes, everybody's gone.' He lay down on the bed beside her. And she moved up close against him. 'I'm lost, Alma. I'm lost.' 'Shhh,' she said. 'Shhh. Shhh. We just go'n have to start again. (214)

Though Phillip would barely go into the kitchen or bedroom to Alma at his home in St. Adrienne, unless he wanted food or sex, he now recognizes Alma as his only help, and his true home. The insistence for "re-vision" of Phillip's character comes from Alma. After losing the entire identity he had built for himself, all Phillip has in the end is his wife's strength and forgiveness, and her encouragement for him to continue having faith.

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In Conclusion: A Woman's World

Gaines was political and controversial in a way that was too subtle for his contemporaries. By using Southern, rural towns as his setting and a main part of his storyline, Gaines addressed problems within the African-American community differently than many of the Black Arts Movement writers, who were using the urban spaces of the city as their settings. The aesthetic branch of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, began in the sixties during the peak of Gaines's writing career. The author was often criticized for being too passive, and for not joining in with the common cry for "poetry that kills." By using only Southern rural towns as his settings, Gaines gives significance and worth to his hometown; his deliberate use of this space is what sets him apart in the literary world.

The private and public spaces in Gaines's novels subtly reveal tension and struggles between family members, sexes, and social groups. Female characters revise their oppressive spaces and take control and authority of their environment. The male characters transgress boundaries, and care less for the stability of the domestic sphere, and are often characterized by Gaines as immature characters who lack responsibility equal to that of the females in the novel. The Womanist characters and the authority they have in the domestic sphere is Gaines's explicit message to comment on other deep issues within the community, such as missing father figures and the oppression they face in the public sphere.

The Womanist characters in Gaines's novels are the Christian solution to the problems within the community. Gaines has commented on the presence of strong women in his life, and his lack of relationship with his own father, as inspiration for this theme in his works. Discussing the inspiration he gets from his aunt, Gaines states, "I've never known anyone as strong as my aunt, physically, and, to me, morally as strong as my aunt, who never walked a day in her life"

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(*Conversations With Ernest Gaines* 44). In regards to his relationship with his father, Gaines states, "There is no contact" (63). Gaines portrays these gendered struggles and tensions within the African-American home in his novels. The lack of connection and communication between fathers and their families is often "fixed" or taken care of by the physically and morally strong women in the community.

The faith of the female characters and their encouragement to the men in the novel to believe make them the Christian solution to destructive problems within the community. Discussing her role as a Womanist in her community, Alice Walker praises the old men in her life: "One of the best acts of my entire life was to take a sack of oranges to Langston Hughes when he had the flu, about two weeks before he died" (135). Walker encouraged women to expand their physical and spiritual care for themselves to include all races, genders, and social classes: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people" (250). In Gaines's novels, male characters neglect, flee from, and destroy the protective boundaries within the private sphere of the home, often in an attempt to gain power in the social world, and the women take responsibility for the homes within their community, using their domestic space as a powerful connection to the public realm. Gaines seems to suggest the positive attributes that his powerful females bring to the community as a solution to the destructive behavior of the males within the African-American community.

The solution proposed by Gaines of Womanist theology addresses multiple issues in the private and public lives of the individuals in the African-American community. In her book on Womanist Theology, Stephanie Mitchem discusses the creative solutions that reality requires the black woman to produce: "[r]ace, combined with gender, forms and informs the lives of black women. Additionally, socioeconomic dimensions of class and income . . . layer the complexity

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of black women's experiences. This complex mixture generates particular faith responses and requires creative responses to daily life. Race, class, and gender all require exploration in order to understand how they combine and shape lives" (5). Though Gaines's stories are filled with struggles between females and males within the private sphere, his attention to these issues serve as a catalyst to bring awareness to serious problems within the larger community. The theme of absent fathers can be seen in Grant's power struggle with Tante Lou and Marcus's fight for freedom, which display the tragic quest for manhood in many African-American male's lives. Religious tension and conflict is evident in Phillip's battle with his past and present lives, which shows his struggle with God and his responsibilities in the home. The theme of social determination can be seen in the male characters fights with the law, which show the unequal balance of power in the public realm and are often degrading to the African-American community. Gaines even comments on the theme of change versus stasis through his use of private and public space. These are issues that Gaines displays through the intersection of different genders, races, and classes in specific settings.

Continuing discussion on Gaines's work and his influence within his community as a revolutionary artist, despite negative criticism from his peers, is necessary. There is a wide range of possibilities for research and study on the different issues Gaines addresses through his female characters and the private sphere of the home. The way Gaines uses physical space, as well as the spaces of gender roles and social class, opens up a discussion about his work and the many problems that he addresses within his community. If Gaines comes to any sort of solution or conclusion about the battles in his fictitious homes, it is the women who have the answer.

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