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An Autobiography but Not Quite: The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman as a Parody

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Abstract

This article examines Ernest J. Gaines' The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1972) as a parody and critique of dominant cultural narratives. Combining close reading with biographical criticism, which contextualizes the novel through Gaines' socio-cultural background as an African American author. Drawing on Bakhtin's and Hannoosh's theories of parody and Gates' concept of chiasmus, the analysis explores how the novel imitates, transforms, and subverts its targets. Bhabha's notion of mimicry situates parody within postcolonial discourse, while Genette's theory of frequency analyzes the novel's repetitive narrative structures. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's concepts of appropriation and abrogation address Gaines' use of English, shaped by his identity as a Black writer from Louisiana and his California education. Bakhtin's heteroglossia highlights the novel's polyphonic structure, reflecting its diverse voices. Ong's theories of orality and literacy contrast Louisiana's oral traditions with Gaines' literary techniques. Interviews with Gaudet and Wooton reveal the influence of white literary traditions on Gaines, situating him within African American literary frameworks. Loomba's critique of colonial discourse positions the novel as a subversive response to white supremacy. Thus, the objective of this study is to demonstrate that Gaines uses parody in the Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman as both a literary form and an ideological tool to challenge hegemonic narratives and amplify African American voices.

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Introduction

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1972) tells the story of Miss Jane's 100-year life, spanning from slavery during the Civil War to 1962. Written in an autobiographical style, the novel recounts historical events from local to national perspectives through her voice. Although it mimics the structure of other Black autobiographies, Gaines clarified that Miss Jane is a fictional character, created to fill the absence of figures like her in history books (Gaines, 2001). The narrative explores themes of freedom from slavery, identity, spirituality, and racial dynamics, addressing issues of gender, power, and social hierarchy.

Attaway & Kelley (2017), Beckhman (1978), and Mahfouf & Al-Shetawi (2019) have discussed about this novel that profoundly delves into the deeply personal and often unspoken Southern experiences of Gaines' community, heavily influenced by his upbringing as the son of a sharecropper. This intimate connection to the South enables Gaines to portray the harsh realities of slavery and its enduring consequences with striking vividness and authenticity. His personal history lends an unparalleled depth to the narrative, allowing him to capture the nuanced struggles and resilience of African Americans in the South. By drawing on his own experiences and the collective memory of his community, Gaines provides a narrative that is both deeply rooted in the historical context and rich in emotional truth. This does not only enhance the realism of his depictions but also reinforces the broader themes of endurance, identity, and social justice that permeate the novel through the usage of oral narrative tradition. However, there has not been any study that focuses on the usage of parody in this novel.

Gaines' use of parody critiques historical and literary conventions. Drawing on oral traditions and Black literary forms like Signifyin(g), as defined by Gates (1983), the novel uses mimicry and repetition to challenge dominant narratives. Influenced by white authors during his academic years, Gaines employs imitative techniques to highlight the subjectivity of Black women. His portrayal reflects Loomba's (2015) view of double oppression based on race and gender.

The analysis applies frameworks like Genette's (1983) narrative structures and Bakhtin (2004) heteroglossia, exploring mixed language use and parody as a tool for subaltern resistance (Bhabha, 2002). Black literary traditions contextualize the work as countering white supremacy, aligning with Peavy's (1971) revolutionary Black novels. The novel's interplay between oral and written traditions, influenced by Louisiana's cultural history and Ong's (2002) theories on orality and literacy, underscores its parodic critique of history and power.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach combining close reading and biographical criticism. Close reading involves reading the text attentively to analyze a text's details, structure, and themes to uncover deeper meanings, following steps like readability assessment, linguistic and thematic exploration, and theoretical interpretation (Ohrvik, 2024).

The close reading method will be combined with Gates' method of "reading the signs" to identify recurring motifs and patterns (Gates, 1983). Genette's narrative framework—covering frequency, mood, voice, focalization, and time structures—guides the analysis of parody through repetition and inversion (Genette, 1988). Theories like Ashcroft's language appropriation and Bakhtin's heteroglossia explore how English variants reflect social stratification and cultural norms.

Gates (1983) Signifying Monkey theory frames Gaines' use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, irony, and hyperbole, highlighting how signifying differs in Black literature from standard English. Abrahams defines it as a subtle, indirect form of argument, persuasion, or provocation through verbal or gestural implications.

Incorporating insights from parody, postcolonial critique, and African American socio-political challenges, this analysis examines how Gaines' narrative strategies critique cultural norms, racial discrimination, and dominant histories.

Biographical criticism is used by using information of Gaines' life, personal experiences, and historical context as a lens to better understand and interpret his work. According to Knoper (2003) and Benson (1989), this approach seeks to reveal the connections between the author's lived experiences and the themes, structures, and language of their texts. Thus, this article also uses journal articles written by Gaines and interviews that clarifies Gaines' works.

Results and Discussion

This section explores how Ernest J. Gaines uses parody in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman as both a storytelling tool and a structural element. The analysis highlights how parody challenges traditional historical narratives, presenting a counter-history that centers on African American women's experiences through Miss Jane Pittman's perspective. It examines how Gaines uses repetition, inversion, and mimicry to critique cultural and racial hierarchies. The text itself is also discussed as a parody of mainstream historical accounts, reimagined through marginalized voices. By embedding parody in the narrative and structure, Gaines offers a powerful critique of power, history, and storytelling.

1. Parody in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

a. Narrative Structure

Parody in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is conveyed through Gates' (1983) strategy of marking, which emphasizes repetition and reversal (chiasmus), particularly evident in the novel's narrative structure. Gaines employs this strategy by showcasing repeated narrative events, a technique that Genette (1983) defines as the frequency of "identical events" or the recurrence of "the same event," distinguished by their similarities (p. 113). In this context, narrative statements are not only produced but also reproduced and repeated within the text. This pattern of repetition and reversal is prevalent in Gaines' novel through elements such as voice, analepsis, mood, and focalization, reflecting the conflicts and racial tensions experienced by the characters.

The repetition in Miss Jane Pittman's story is explicitly acknowledged by the editor—a history teacher who records and transcribes her narrative. The fictional editor notes, "*I couldn't possibly put down on paper everything Miss Jane and the others said on the tape during those eight or nine months. Most of it was too repetitive and didn't follow one direction*" (Gaines, 1972, p. vii)). Despite the editor's attempts to organize the narrative, repetition remains a prominent feature, structuring the novel chronologically from the emancipation era to the civil rights movement. One key repetitive motif is the renaming of Miss Jane Pittman.

Originally named Ticey by her enslaver, she is renamed Jane Brown by a white Yankee soldier, Colonel Brown, who declares, "*Ticey is a slave name, and I don't like slavery*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 8). Her name changes again to Jane Pittman after her relationship with Joe Pittman. This motif extends to Jane's foster son, Ned Douglass, who adopts the last name Douglass, inspired by Frederick Douglass. While Jane's renaming is imposed by others, Ned's self-appropriation of a new name signifies agency. Such patterns of renaming resonate with narratives by black authors like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, where name changes symbolize identity and resistance.

Repetition is evident in Jane's repeated but unsuccessful attempts to leave Louisiana for Ohio, symbolizing her continued entrapment and symbolic enslavement. The theme of resistance recurs through her foster sons, Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron, who are both killed for challenging white supremacy by educating and mobilizing the Black community. These recurring events and character arcs highlight the cyclical struggles of African Americans, emphasizing resilience, resistance, and the enduring fight against oppression.

In addition to repetition as a thematic and structural device, Gaines incorporates repetition using a multivocal narrative technique, a strategy also employed by Faulkner. This approach is evident in the novel through shifts in focalization and narrators, allowing multiple perspectives to shape the narrative. Genette (1988) defines focalization as the limitation of narrative information, describing it as "a situated focus" where the narrator's knowledge is constrained by the specific context of the narrative (p. 74). This narrative limitation ensures that the information provided is filtered through the perspective of a particular character or situation.

Genette (1983) classifies narrative voice into three types: homodiegetic (narrator is part of the story), heterodiegetic (narrator is outside the story), and autodiegetic (narrator is both protagonist and central figure) (p. 244–245). In Gaines's novel, the narrator's role ties to Genette's concept of "extradiegetic information," which includes details beyond the immediate story (1988, p. 77). This layered structure creates a dynamic interplay of voices, enriching the novel's exploration of historical and racial themes while reinforcing its complex narrative form.

Although Gaines adopts Faulkner's multivocal narrative style, he modifies it through focalization and narrative voice. Miss Jane occupies multiple narrative roles, including that of an auto diegetic narrator, narrating her personal experiences as a slave from an extradiegetic level, using the "*I*" perspective. Simultaneously, she also acts as a heterodiegetic narrator, recounting events beyond her direct involvement, such as the karmic retribution faced by Albert Cluveau after he murders her foster son, Ned. Furthermore, Miss Jane's presence as a character disappears entirely in scenes such as the description of the Creole Place plantation, the meeting between Mary Agnes and Tee Bob, and the dialogue between Jimmy Caya and Tee Bob, which highlights racial tensions. This narrative employs mimetic dialogue, exemplified by Jimmy's remarks: "*But Africa is in her veins, and that makes her nigger, Robert,*" and "*Don't you listen in class? Ain't you heard him*" (p. 182).

The novel frequently transitions between internal focalization, centered on Miss Jane's perspective, and zero focalization, which provides an omniscient view, affecting the extent of Miss Jane's narrative authority. When Miss Jane adopts the role of a heterodiegetic narrator, she demonstrates knowledge of the thoughts and emotions of other characters, akin to an omniscient narrator. This narrative complexity creates an extradiegetic structure, with the editor organizing the story chronologically. Through other characters, such as Ned Douglass, Ned's students, Adeline Cluveau, and Jimmy Caya, Miss Jane acquires seemingly unlimited information, fostering credibility with readers. The editor underscores this dynamic, explaining that Miss Jane's narrative incorporates voices from others: "others carried stories for her" (Gaines, 1972, p. vi). Gaudet & Wooton (1990) argue that this is part of Gaines' strategy to present the narrator as possessing unlimited knowledge. However, Miss Jane's narrative authority diminishes in interactions with characters holding greater power, such as when she questions Robert Samson about Jimmy Aaron's murder, to which Robert replies, "*[w]ell, I didn't shoot him,*" and "*I didn't know nothing about it till they called the house*" (p. 259).

b. Appropriation and Abrogation of the English Language

Language appropriation in this novel not only shows borrowing, but also shows abrogation that involves the rejection of language and central power in the communication process (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 37). In addition, language appropriation is also used by postcolonial writers to bear the burden of one's cultural experience and to re-arrange English as the central language into English which indicates the modification of English with ethnography or the writer's "differentiating function".

When analyzed through Gaines' interviews and writings, the appropriation of English in his novels is deeply connected to the cultural and linguistic landscape of Louisiana. Gaines frequently incorporates French phrases, such as "Mon sha" (Gaines, 1972, pp. 97–100), used by Miss Jane during her consultation with Madame Gautier, a Creole voodoo shaman.

These terms are deliberately left untranslated, signaling Gaines' intention to emphasize cultural specificity and differentiate his works from those of other African American writers. The use of French, along with names in "Old French" like Albert Cluveau and Marie Agnes LeFabre, and the depiction of Creole aristocracy, reflects what Fabre (1978) describes as the "accumulation of details [that] extends the Louisiana of Gaines" (p. 112). This attention to linguistic and cultural detail underscores the

distinctiveness of Gaines' fictional Bayonne in comparison to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Furthermore, the incorporation of French references connects to the historical diaspora of the Acadians, expelled in 1755 and resettled in Louisiana, where their identity evolved into known as Cajun (Hebert-Leiter, 2006, p. 96). This linguistic layering not only situates Gaines' works within the specificity of Louisiana's cultural history but also reflects the region's complex intersections of race, language, and identity.

The socio-economic structure of Louisiana significantly influenced Gaines' literary production, particularly in his nuanced use of language and social markers. For instance, the term Creole, originally denoting colonial origins, is adapted by Gaines to signify a specific class marker. He further narrows its connotation to denote plantation owners who wielded substantial social and economic power. As Hebert-Leiter (2006) observes, the socio-economic stratification in Louisiana also gave rise to terms such as poor whites and the more pejorative poor white trash, which were used to describe Cajuns within the framework of social and economic disparities (p. 116).

Furthermore, Gaines's use of the term nigger in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is complex and extends beyond its conventional application to Black characters. According to Kennedy (2000), the term, derived from the Spanish negro, evolved into a pejorative in English, symbolizing the subjugation of Black individuals as an "inferior race" (p. 86). In the novel, Miss Jane deploys the term not only in a racial context but also as a mechanism of satire and resistance. For example, when Yankee soldiers ridicule her while seeking directions to Ohio, Jane subverts their mockery by declaring, "*[n]ot all colored is niggers, but them niggers back there…. Yankee uniform or no Yankee uniform, they ain't nothing but common niggers*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 40). Similarly, Jane employs the term in a personal critique of Katie Nelson's husband, referring to him as "*that little red nigger she called a husband*" and "*that little red thing she called a husband*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 137-138).

Gaines's strategic use of the term exemplifies what Ashcroft et al., (2002) describe as abrogation, the deliberate refusal of "traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (p. 37). By parodying the term, Gaines reappropriates its usage, challenging and destabilizing its pejorative associations. This subversive approach allows him to critique social hierarchies and reclaim agency within the linguistic constructs of power.

In addition to untranslated words and the rejection of fixed central meanings, Gaines's novels are marked by the adaptation of local linguistic syntactic systems to the orthography of the central English language. This is evident in the non-standard grammatical structures frequently employed by Black characters, such as the replacement of the past-tense marker -ed with -t (e.g., kill-ed becomes kilt), the use of ain't as a substitute for auxiliary verbs, contractions like you all becoming y'all, and the frequent occurrence of double negatives. These linguistic forms reflect the influence of oral culture, which will be explored in greater depth in the next section.

According to Bakhtin (2004), the presence of such dialectal diversity within a novel exemplifies its heteroglossia, a defining characteristic that reveals the "multiplicity of social voices" (p. 674). In Gaines's works, this linguistic heterogeneity underscores the social and cultural stratification within his narratives. Furthermore, Folks (1999) attributes the diversity of social dialects in Gaines's novels to what he terms the "Californian perspective." This perspective stems from Gaines's migration to California at the age of 15, an experience that allowed him to view Louisiana through a lens shaped by exposure to "more diverse communities" (p. 262). This dual perspective enriches his portrayal of Louisiana's socio-linguistic landscape, blending local oral traditions with broader cultural observations.

c. Modification of Orality and Writing

The novel's transformation of spoken dialect into written form, known as grapholect, is a key feature. Ong (2002) explains that grapholect emerges through writing, which restructures thought and is inherently spatial (p. 7). He also argues that written culture acts as an imperial force, assimilating other cultures without etymological ties (p. 11).

Ashcroft et al. (2002) describe English as a "modern grapholect," reinforced by written, printed, and digital media. Ong (2002) notes that this widespread use enables access to past centuries' thoughts while framing English as the default lens for interpreting other dialects, implying these dialects lack self-sufficiency (p. 101).

Beckhman (1978) expands on this by noting that Gaines incorporates not only Southern dialect pronunciation but also integrates the syntax, sound, and oral storytelling traditions into The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (p. 102). This approach is exemplified in Miss Jane's narrative, which is recorded and rewritten by an editor, resulting in written pronunciations that deviate from standard English. Examples include Luzana for Louisiana, as in *"[y]ou trying to tell me I'm still in Luzana?" I said. "Yep. Still Luzana," he said*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 50); *Fed'jal Gov'ment* for Federal Government in "*most of the talk was the Fedjal Gov'ment—'specially the Republican Party*" (p 68); *invessagator* for investigator in *"[t]he invessagator got off the horse and told us to follow him*" (p. 35); and *lectwicity* for electricity in *"[w]e had lectwcity down here now*" (p. 220).

According to Beckhman (1978), Gaines's objective is not merely to preserve oral traditions but also to celebrate "the special quality, the fresh attractive novelty, of Southern Black folk speech" (p. 104). Through this deliberate use of non-standard English and phonetic renderings, Gaines elevates the oral traditions of Southern Black communities while challenging the centrality of standardized English as the sole medium of cultural and linguistic expression.

Similar to other novels written by Gaines such as *The Gathering of Old Men*, this novel is deeply rooted in oral culture, a foundational element of African American identity and storytelling traditions, by using the fictional editor to write the autobigoraphy based on Miss Jane's oral story to narrate the Southern experience (Beckhman, 1978; Mahfouf & Al-Shetawi, 2019). Clark (2002), drawing on Smitherman's insights, underscores that oral tradition serves as both a preserver of African American culture and a reflection of African racial unity. Smitherman further asserts that African oral traditions are shaped by a historical tendency among African Americans to prioritize oral expression over written forms, as speaking is often a more confident and natural mode of communication for them (p. 28).

Furhtermore, Ong (2002) expands on this by exploring the transformative impact of writing on oral traditions, specifically how the process of writing converts spoken dialects into grapholect (p. 7). However, Ong critiques the hegemony of written culture, noting that it often leads to oral art forms being dismissed as "essentially unskillful and not worth serious study." This perception is perpetuated by the dominance of literate elites, who render oral traditions dependent on the validation of written traditions. Ong challenges this hierarchy, emphasizing that written traditions are inseparable from and inherently reliant on oral traditions, which they often supplant (8).

Ong (2002) delineates two forms of orality: primary orality and secondary orality. Primary orality refers to oral cultures untouched by the influence of written or printed knowledge, whereas secondary orality describes contemporary oral cultures shaped by electronic media, which function through the frameworks of writing and print. Ong critiques the conceptual tension inherent in terms such as "oral literature," which he considers "monstrous concepts" that paradoxically attempt to reconcile oral and written traditions. He argues that written culture imposes a restrictive "visual field," locking oral traditions into a static, textual form (p. 11).

In this context, Gaines's novels can be seen as a reclamation of oral traditions within the written form, challenging the perceived supremacy of literate culture while preserving the dynamic, communal, and performative qualities of African American oral storytelling. This interplay between orality and literacy highlights the enduring significance of oral traditions as a vehicle for cultural expression and resistance.

d. Mimicry by the Characters

In Gaines's novels, parody often manifests through the mimicry exhibited by Black, Creole, or mulatto characters, serving as a critical strategy to challenge social and cultural norms. Morson (1989) notes that parody can be alternatively understood as mimicry (p. 63), though mimicry itself is often associated with non-verbal or performative phenomena. Bhabha (1984) introduces the concept of mimicry as embodying an ambivalence captured in the phrase "almost the same, but not quite," wherein mimicry simultaneously resembles and subverts the original form (p. 127). This duality renders mimicry a disruptive force, as the colonized's mimicry of the colonizer undermines the authority and boundaries of colonial power (Ferguson, 2002, p. 554).

Morson (1989) distinguishes parody from mere imitation, emphasizing that while imitation seeks to merge the voices of the imitator and the original into a singular, indistinguishable voice, parody maintains a critical distance. In parody, the relationship between the two voices is marked by a dialogic tension, enabling both to coexist while subverting the authority of the original (65).

Thus, the mimicry present in Gaines's works, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* functions not merely as imitation but as a sophisticated form of parody. It destabilizes dominant narratives by exposing their contradictions and asserting the agency of marginalized voices within the socio-cultural dynamics of colonial and post-colonial settings.

An illustrative example of mimicry in Gaines's novels is found in the behavior of young Miss Jane, who refers to Black soldiers as "nigger" and uses the term "red nigger" to describe Katie's husband. This mimicry extends to her characterization of Mary Agnes LeFabre's identity, which Miss Jane explains through what Aubert (1978) describes as a "literary stereotype" of Creole identity—defined as being "neither white nor Black" (69). In response to Tee Bob's inquiry about LeFabre's racial identity, Miss Jane succinctly answers, "[a]lmost, but not quite" (Gaines, 1972: 172), a phrase that reflects the ambivalence central to mimicry as theorized by Bhabha.

Mimicry extends to the Creole community, whose practices mirror the exclusionary nature of racial hierarchies. Despite their proximity to whiteness, Creoles imitate racist behaviors, rejecting outsiders. Miss Jane notes that no matter how white someone was, if they lacked a Creole background, they were unwelcome (167). This mimicry is further seen in Raphael, a mulatto character, who calls white Cajun intruders "common niggers" (168), subverting racial stereotyping by directing it at white Cajuns. This highlights the social positioning of both Creoles and white Cajuns within a complex racial hierarchy.

In these examples, mimicry operates not simply as replication but as a strategy that exposes and disrupts the hierarchical structures of race and class. By appropriating and redirecting the language and behaviors of dominant and subordinate groups, Gaines's characters navigate and critique the socio-racial dynamics of their environment.

In addition to Miss Jane and the Creole characters, non-Creole mulatto characters in Gaines's novel also engage in mimicry of white behaviors, further complicating the racial dynamics within the narrative. Timmy, the son of Robert Samson and an unnamed Black woman, exemplifies this behavior. He mirrors Robert Samson's racist attitudes but limits his actions to Black individuals, as Miss Jane observes: "*Robert didn't care what he did to white or black. Timmy didn't care what he did to men or women long as they were black*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 145). This imitation reflects Timmy's liminal identity as someone who exists in the in-between space of being "*neither white nor Black*." His position enables him to appropriate elements of Robert's authority and behavior, yet it is constrained by his racial status. As Miss Jane notes, "*[Timmy] had to remember he was still a nigger*" (p. 151).

Timmy's identity as a mulatto aligns with what Loomba (2015) identifies as "*cultural and racial pollution*," a concept that highlights the perceived threat such individuals pose to established racial and social hierarchies. Timmy's existence destabilizes the legitimacy

of Robert Samson's marriage to Miss Amma Dean, who views Timmy as a symbol of transgression and labels him "a half nigger".

Through Timmy's mimicry, Gaines critiques the rigid racial boundaries of the plantation system, illustrating how the power dynamics of whiteness are both imitated and undermined by those occupying liminal spaces. This imitation underscores the fragility of these hierarchies, as Timmy's behavior simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes the social structures that define his marginalization.

2. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman as Parody

a. Parody as anti-genre

In addition to the oppositional qualities of parody, Morson, (1989) conceptualizes parody as an anti-genre. Morson describes anti-genres as works that are constructed within the "tradition of previous works of the anti-genre" and note that while anti-genres may possess "classic texts and exemplars," they do not necessarily have fixed originating works, as the broader tradition of literary parody often serves as their model (p. 74). This perspective aligns with Hannoosh (1989) assertion that parody, through its reflexive nature, possesses the capacity to critique both the work being parodied and itself. This reflexivity challenges the notion of works as "fixed" and immutable (p. 113–14).

Applying these characteristics to Gaines's novels situates them as anti-genres that subvert existing literary forms. For instance, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman adopts and reconfigures the conventions of Black autobiographies, deceiving readers into perceiving the text as a genuine autobiography. This effect was so convincing that Gaines felt compelled to clarify the fictional nature of his work by publishing a journal entry in which he stated, "*I created Miss Jane, and if [I] did not create all the events she mentions in her narrative, [I] definitively created all the situations that she is personally involved in*" (Gaines, 2001, p. 23). Despite its autobiographical façade, the novel remains a work of fiction.

Through its anti-generic qualities, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman exemplifies the paradoxical nature of parody and anti-genre forms, simultaneously engaging with and subverting established conventions. By doing so, Gaines critiques the limits of literary genres while creating a text that blurs the boundaries between fiction and historical authenticity.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman employs a narrative structure that closely mirrors the thematic elements of Black autobiographies, as outlined by Blassingame (1974). These themes include "emigration, self-help, separation, the need for racial cooperation, and the desire for liberating, usable Black history" (p. 4). Such themes serve to underscore the alienation, humiliation, injustice, and oppression experienced by Black Americans throughout history (p. 4). Autobiographies in this tradition were often used as tools of protest by Black writers, acting as a counter-narrative to the caricatures of Black life perpetuated by white historians (p. 7). Moreover, these works sought to celebrate "Africa and Blackness" (p. 7), while often depicting white American society as "moral degenerates" to highlight systemic racial injustices.

Blassingame (1974) highlights that Black autobiographies were crafted by educated writers to challenge dominant white narratives. In contrast, Gaines's novel centers on Miss Jane, an illiterate African American woman recounting her century-long life, including slavery, to an editor. This fictional editor, acting as a "trickster figure" per Gates, records and reshapes her story, blending interviews and revisions to create a seemingly authentic autobiography. The narrative weaves in historical figures like Huey P. Long and events such as the Great Mississippi Flood, slavery's abolition, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement.

This blending of real historical events with fictionalized elements blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, encouraging readers to perceive the narrative as a legitimate autobiography. The novel, therefore, functions as both a commentary on the limitations of historical representation and

a critique of the authority traditionally ascribed to autobiographical and historical texts. Through this narrative strategy, Gaines reclaims Black historical experiences while simultaneously challenging readers to interrogate the authenticity and objectivity of historical accounts.

The historical narrative in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is conveyed through the voice and perspective of Miss Jane, along with other characters who contribute their viewpoints on significant events. One such example is the rumor surrounding the death of Huey P. Long, which Miss Jane recounts in her own terms: "*They killed him for helping the poor, the poor black and the poor white* (Gaines, 1972, p. 158)." However, Miss Jane expresses her skepticism about the accepted explanation of Long's death, asserting: "*Dr. Weiss killed Long. Well, they ain't go'n make me believe that. Want say he killed Long because Long said Dr. Weiss wife's grand daddy had nigger blood in his veins*" (Gaines, 1972, p. 158). Miss Jane then narrates a conspiracy involving doctors and bodyguards who allegedly plotted Long's assassination.

In an interview with Gaudet & Wooton (1990), Gaines acknowledges that he has "been listening to blacks talk about Long's death all [his] life" (p. 238). Despite this, he remains doubtful of such rumors and, to uncover the truth, conducts his own research by consulting newspapers, biographies, and visiting the LSU library (p. 239). This process of incorporating historical inquiry into the fictional narrative mirrors the novel's larger engagement with historical events, further complicating the boundary between fact and fiction.

The journey from Luzana (Louisiana) to Ohio, despite her knowledge of the Emancipation Proclamation, can be interpreted as a quest for freedom, underscoring the theme of resistance within Black autobiography traditions. Throughout this journey, Miss Jane encounters white characters who embody the "moral degeneracy" often depicted in Black autobiographies. These characters, including Confederate soldiers, a hired killer (Albert Cluveau), a plantation owner (Colonel Dye), a racist Cajun (Jimmy Caya), and a foreman (Tom Joe), consistently obstruct Miss Jane's progress and perpetuate racist behavior toward Black individuals.

However, not all white characters in the narrative are depicted in a negative light, which contrasts with the typical portrayal of white figures in Black autobiographies. Characters like Colonel Brown, an unnamed white female slave owner referred to as "Misses" by Miss Jane, and Mr. Bone, a plantation owner described as fair and just, offer a more complex depiction of interracial interactions. For instance, Mr. Bone is portrayed as a compassionate employer, with his workers expressing pride in working for him, as evidenced by Miss Jane's reflection: "[w]e used to say, with our heads high, 'Mr. Bone place'" (Gaines, 1972, p. 71). Through these characters, Gaines introduces a nuanced representation of white figures who deviate from the stereotypical oppressors found in traditional Black autobiographies.

By including such diverse portrayals of white characters, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman challenges conventional narratives in Black autobiographical literature. Gaines subverts the typical binary of Black victimhood and white antagonism, offering a more multifaceted exploration of race, power, and identity. This serves as a critique of the simplistic representations of whiteness in earlier Black autobiographies, suggesting that white characters, like Black individuals, occupy complex and varied roles within the social and historical context.

b. Resistance

Parody is use to challenge narratives asserting authority over Black characters is central to Gaines's work. Peavy (1971) notes that Black novels of the 1960s often focused on Black pride and self-awareness, rejecting white dominance (p. 180). This rejection aligns with Negritude, a recurring motif in Gaines's novels, which counters European or white-centric worldviews. Bakhtin, via Morson (1989), describes parody as "antithetical to its target" (p. 67), while Ashcroft et al., (2002) argue it can oppose the hegemonic thesis of white supremacy (p. 20). Negritude, in this

context, functions as a parody, emphasizing cultural and racial differences to critique racial hierarchies. In Gaines's novels, the portrayal of Black identity through Negritude acts as a strategic parody, resisting white supremacy while affirming Black cultural value and reclaiming identity and agency.

This is set in Bayonne, a fictional city in Louisiana that he created as the primary setting for his narratives. Fabre (1978) draws a parallel between Bayonne and Yoknapatawpha, the fictional county in Faulkner's works, suggesting a similar function as a microcosm for exploring broader societal dynamics (p. 112). However, Fabre also highlights a critical distinction: Bayonne in Gaines' novels reflects a transforming social structure that increasingly empowers Black characters (p. 117). Expanding on this perspective, Folks (1999) asserts that Gaines' works interweave social context with a deliberate critique of the alienation perpetuated by capitalist and racist systems. According to Folks, Gaines employs history not merely as a backdrop but as a "vision of social change," utilizing American social history in "naturalistic terms" to envision and advocate for transformation (p. 260-261).

Ned Douglass delivers "*the sermon at the river*," emphasizing the necessity of Black unity in resisting white hegemony. During his address, Ned declares: "*This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you…. The white man will use every trick in the trade to take it from you*" (p. 112). He further exhorts his audience to "*don't run and do fight. Fight white and black for all of this place*," while drawing a distinction between the terms "nigger" and "Black American." This distinction aligns with Kennedy's (2000) citation of Hosea Easton, who defines nigger as "an opprobrious term, employed to impose contempt upon blacks as an inferior race" (p. 86). In Ned's explanation, a "nigger" signifies someone who "feels below anybody else on earth…. He'll never be American, and he'll never be a citizen of any other nation" (p. 115). Conversely, a "Black American" is characterized as someone who "cares and will always struggle. Every day that he gets up, he hopes that his day will be better" (p. 115).

Ned's critique extends beyond white supremacy to encompass ignorance, regardless of racial identity. He condemns ignorance as the root cause of subjugation, stating, "*Ignorance that put us here in the first place*," and acknowledges the complicity of Black individuals, asserting that "*[o]ur own black people have put us up in pens like hogs, waiting to sell us into slavery*" (p. 116). Additionally, Ned and Miss Jane critique Booker T. Washington's emphasis on trade and economic accommodation over direct resistance to racial oppression. According to Ned, Washington's approach has coincided with increased violence: "Since he made that statement over five years ago, over a thousand men have been lynched. And for no other reason but their black skin" (p. 117).

This critique of Washington's ideology is further illustrated through the character of Joe Hardy, a Black teacher who exploits Washington's philosophy to advance his personal interests. Hardy uses his students to work plantation land and sell his merchandise, embodying what Belsey (1994) identifies as the function of education within "contemporary capitalism." According to Belsey, such educational practices prepare individuals to align with dominant societal values by instilling conformity to the prevailing notions of appropriate behavior (p. 356).

In addition to Ned Douglass, Jimmy Aaron, Miss Jane's foster son, also plays a significant role in mobilizing resistance within the Samson Plantation community. He actively encourages Black members of the church to join the broader African American Civil Rights Movement, which Miss Jane refers to as the "Civil Rights Trouble". Unlike Ned, however, Jimmy appeals directly to Miss Jane, emphasizing her potential to inspire others in the community: "*You can inspire the others*" (Gaines, 1972). Jimmy's efforts spark tensions with church leaders such as Pastor Just Thomas and Elder Banks, who argue that the unique socio-economic conditions of Samson Plantation hinder their ability to participate in the movement. Banks, responding to Thomas's comparison of their situation with Reverend King's, asserts that *"[w]hat happened in*

Birmingham, what happened in Atlanta can't happen here" (p. 239).

The reluctance to act stems from systemic economic dependency and fear of retaliation. As Banks explains, the residents "*don't even own the furniture in [their] house. The store in Bayonne own[s] it, and they can take the bed or the stove from us tomorrow.*" Further, "[*t]he man up there owns that graveyard…. He owns the house we live in, he owns the little garden where we grow our food*" (p. 239). This pervasive control by Robert Samson, the plantation owner, inhibits collective resistance among the elderly and economically vulnerable population.

Jimmy's death becomes a transformative moment for Miss Jane and others who initially rejected the "Civil Rights Trouble" movement. His martyrdom compels the community to overcome their fear and participate in the fight for civil rights in Bayonne. Jimmy's role as "the One" within the community reflects Gaines' reimagining of Christian mythology, wherein Jimmy's character serves as a Christ-like figure. Miss Jane's apprehension about Jimmy's fate underscores his mythic significance: "I was scared something was go'n happen to him or he would be taken from us" (p. 217). Yet, his death becomes a source of empowerment, as the community draws strength from the belief that "[j]ust a little piece of him is dead. The rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne" (p. 259). This symbolic resurrection affirms Jimmy's enduring legacy as a catalyst for social and political transformation.

Conclusion

This study examines how Ernest J. Gaines uses parody in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman to challenge dominant cultural and historical narratives while amplifying African American voices. By imitating and transforming Black autobiographical conventions, Gaines critiques their structures and themes, using parody as both a narrative device and an ideological tool. The novel blends real historical events, such as the Civil Rights Movement, with fictionalized accounts, blurring the line between fact and fiction and critiquing the supposed objectivity of historical representation. This analysis focuses solely on Miss Jane Pittman and invites further research into parody in Gaines' other works and its broader role in African American literature.

Parody extends to the novel's treatment of racial hierarchies and identities. Characters like Miss Jane and Timmy mimic and subvert white authority, exposing its fragility. Miss Jane's appropriation of racial stereotypes and Timmy's mimicry of his white father's racism highlight the instability of racial boundaries, reflecting Bhabha's concept of mimicry as resistance. Gaines also challenges traditional autobiography by blending oral traditions with written form, which, according to Ong (2002), reclaims marginalized voices and critiques the dominance of written culture as a colonial force.

This "anti-genre" approach, as theorized by Morson (1989) and Hannoosh (1989), destabilizes fixed meanings and critiques the authority of written history. Ultimately, Gaines' novel subverts racial ideologies, deconstructs genre conventions, and reclaims Black oral traditions, redefining historical fiction as a vehicle for resistance and cultural affirmation.

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