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PATHWAYS TO EMANCIPATION AND HUMANITY: A READING OF ERNEST J. GAINES' *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN* AND A LESSON BEFORE DYING.

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Abstract : This article purports to investigate the true keys that Ernest J. Gaines recommends the rural Blacks to achieve genuine emancipation and attain full humanity. It analyzes the missions of key figures in two of the author's works: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993). From a postcolonial perspective, the analysis likens Black American communities to internal colonies struggling to break free from white domination, to shed supremacist stances and dehumanizing attitudes in order to build an accepted citizenship and a humanity free from ambiguity. Ultimately, as keys to lasting change, the study proposes that Black people embrace sacrificial heroism, since this act allows the hero to die as an example and a martyr. The second key proposed is the choice of quality education over that imposed by the white community – which is limited in time and impact. The third key is writing, for it gives its author the means to connect with the outside world and opens the doors to a certified humanity. Any peoples who aspire to remain in collective memory must write their history.

Keywords: education, emancipation, humanity, sacrificial heroism, writing.

Résumé : Cette étude a pour but de révéler les véritables clefs qu'Ernest J. Gaines préconise pour que les Noirs puissent atteindre une vraie émancipation et une humanité achevée. Elle analyse donc les missions de personnages importants dans deux des ouvrages de l'auteur : *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* et *A Lesson Before Dying*. Dans une perspective post-colonialiste, l'analyse a assimilé les communautés noires Américaines à des colonies internes qui se battent pour s'affranchir de la domination blanche, pour se débarrasser des postures suprématistes et des attitudes déshumanisantes afin de construire une citoyenneté acceptée et une humanité qui ne souffre d'aucune ambiguïté. Au final, comme clefs de changement durable, l'étude propose aux noirs d'accepter l'héroïsme sacrificiel puisque cet acte permet au héros de mourir en exemple et en martyr. La deuxième clef proposée est celle relative à l'option pour une éducation de qualité au détriment de celle imposée par la communauté blanche – qui est limitée en temps et en impact. La troisième clef est celle de l'écriture car elle confère à son auteur et lui ouvre les portes pour une humanité certifiée. Aussi, tout peuple qui aspire à demeurer dans la mémoire collective doit écrire son histoire.

Mots clés : écriture, éducation, émancipation, héroïsme sacrificiel, humanité

Introduction

With the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the American nation believed it could guarantee Black people access to a universal humanity. Nevertheless, official pronouncements of freedom were replaced by schemes and artifices designed to circumvent the law and continue to enslave Black people. Several Southern states, whose economies relied solely on slavery, quickly drafted codes of conduct whose primary purpose was to maintain Black people in a state of subhuman status, conditioning them to exploitation under the same conditions as those of slavery. The lives of Black South Americans sank into unprecedented hardship, as they were hunted down to their very last refuge. This was the era of patrolmen who would catch or shoot fleeing Black people; the era of the Ku Klux Klan, which savagely massacred Black people to instill terror; the era of anti-amalgamation laws and the denial of Black people's fundamental human rights.

Many Southern authors, descendants of former slaves, depict the discomfort of Black people in this post-slavery period. Alice Walker, in *The Color Purple* (1982), explores the condition of Black women in the post-slavery South, while highlighting patriarchal violence, rural poverty, and the quest for voice and personal emancipation. Emphasizing the limitations imposed by Blacks' freedom after emancipation, Richard Wright, in *Black Boy* (1945) and *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), presents a harsher, more realistic image of the segregated South: racial violence, hunger, fear, and systemic oppression. Ralph Ellison, in *The Invisible Man* (1952), highlights the social and racial invisibility inherited from the post-slavery order.

Of all these neo-slave narratives, those of Ernest J. Gaines, notably *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), are the ones that, in addition to describing life on plantations transformed into a sharecropping system, emphasize dignity, moral resistance, the construction of Black masculinity in the face of oppression. Gaines is convinced that acts of heroism alone cannot permanently liberate Black people and make them fully human. He therefore proposes a set of keys that are the essential condition for true emancipation.

So what are these keys that Gaines' literature suggests? If the quest for masculinity and heroism is fundamental, are not there other actions or approaches that the Black community must undertake to achieve qualitative change?

The analysis draws on Post-colonialism, not to argue that the United States is a colony in the classical sense, but to offer a neo-colonial reading or an interpretation of internalized domination. Race relations in the southern United States have always reproduced colonial

logics that manifest as strict racial hierarchies, the dehumanization of Black people, and the control of bodies and spaces through ideological instruments; all this suggesting an internal colonial system where Black people are treated as a colonized people. In the same vein, the mechanisms that Gaines proposes, particularly education and writing, are instruments of decolonization.

Drawing on all these theoretical insights, the study first analyzes how sacrificial heroism can contribute to giving Black communities greater visibility. Next, it demonstrates how, beyond sacrifice, a well-directed education can truly liberate Black people. Finally, the study highlights the importance of writing for a Black community that wants to be respected and free from the condescending gaze of white people.

1 – Sacrificial heroism, Change and Humanity.

Ernest J. Gaines's novels, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying* strongly argue that true and lasting change within oppressed black communities is achieved not through passive endurance, stoicism, resilience or non-structural bravery, but through acts of sacrificial heroism embodied by figures like Jefferson and Ned. In both narratives, Gaines constructs heroism not as triumphant heroism, but as a conscious, costly decision to confront injustice in ways that transform collective consciousness.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson's journey from dehumanization to self-affirmation illustrates this principle: the necessity of sacrificing one's life for the sake of the community as Grant defines it:

A hero is someone who does something for the other people. He does something that other men don't do and can't do. He is different from other men. He is above other men. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them...A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he know it would make their lives better. (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p. 191)

What Grant Wiggins asks Jefferson to do that would make him above other men is to accept the ultimate sacrifice and turn this act into an act of collective regeneration. Initially reduced to a "hog" (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p.8) by a racist legal system, Jefferson internalizes this identity, and even starts acting as such, symbolizing the psychological violence of white supremacy. In a hypocritical discourse with colonialist lining, his defense attorney unleashes deeply downgrading and demonic descriptions against him:

Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand – look deeply into these eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan

– can plan – can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa – yes, yes, that he can do – but to plan? To plan, gentlemen of the jury? No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. That is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning robbery or a murder (E.J. Gaines, 1993, pp. 7-8).

Under the pretense of defending Jefferson, the white attorney rather reveals the community's stereotypes that have always looked upon Blacks as animals. It is such zoomorphic depictions that Jefferson internalizes and which ultimately breaks to pieces the little human perception he had of himself.

However, through the intervention of Grant and the moral tutoring of the black community, particularly his godmother and Grant's aunt, Jefferson comes to discover his intrinsic forces and dignity. He accepts his doom and walks to the electric chair. This ultimate act – the movement to the chair with composure and strength – is profoundly sacrificial. He faces death rather than resisting, embracing it as a means of reclaiming humanity. This moment transforms Jefferson into a martyr whose courage reshapes his community's perception of him and of itself as well. His death is not an endpoint, but a catalyst: it instills pride, resistance and a redefined sense of manhood before those who witness or hear of his final moments. After Jefferson's execution, Grant admits: "nothing will ever be the same after today" (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p. 248). And he is right, because for the first time, Paul Bonin, the white jailer, gets down the quarters, something he had never done before prior to Jefferson sacrificial heroism. C. A. Crisu (2007, p. 167) contends: "Grant's demand of sacrificial heroism is essential not just for Jefferson's redemption, but for educating others" because the black children will have "someone who can stand as a genuine model of higher conduct." (C. A. Crisu, p. 167) Jefferson's sacrifice disrupts the internalized inferiority imposed by colonialist and racist structures, and actually takes the form of postcolonial ideas of reclaiming subjectivity through resistance.

Similarly, in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Ned's trajectory reflects a more overtly political form of sacrificial heroism. Raised with a strong sense of injustice, Ned evolves into a teacher and activist who openly challenges racial oppression in the post-Reconstruction South. His decision to educate Black people and encourage economic independence directly threatens the white supremacist order. Unlike Jefferson, whose resistance is largely symbolic, Ned Douglass's is explicitly ideological and collective. Yet, both converge in sacrifice: Ned is

murdered for his activism while Jefferson is executed to silence the whole black community. What makes Ned's assassination a sacrifice of a hero, death in martyrdom, is that he is perfectly aware of the death threats that linger over him. He sees death coming, yet he would not recede. Both the pattern of his school and his addresses to the kids are highly defying and extremely dangerous. Sensing his ineluctable death, he gathers his disciples on the bank of the river where he is building his school and where he already teaches them what types of people they should endeavor to become:

This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you. It's yours because your people's bones lays in it; it's yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth. The white man will use everything in the trade to take it from you. He will use every way he know how to get you wool-gathered. He'll turn you against each other. But remind this, your peoples bones and their dust make this place yours more than anything else. . I'm not telling y'all men own the earth. When he die he go back in the earth just like a tree go back in the earth when it fall, just like iron go back in the earth when it rust. You don't own this earth, you're just here for a little while, but while you're here don't let no man tell you the best is for him and you take the scrap. No your people plowed this earth, your people chopped down the trees, your people built the roads and built the levees. These same people is now buried in this earth, and their bones' fertilizing this earth. (E.J. Gaines, 1971, pp. 107-108)

Ned's blames clearly point to the white world and he knows the outcome. He knew right from the beginning that his choice involved death. So he readied his whole family to the idea that at any time he might get killed. He kept repeating to his wife that he was going to be assassinated for his activism. At the end of his sermon, he tells his surrogate mother, "I'm going to die, Mama" (E.J. Gaines, 1971, p. 113). Unsurprisingly, Ned is killed by white radicals.

His death, however, is not futile. It becomes a foundational moment in the long struggle for civil rights, inspiring future generations, including Jimmy Aaron, who continues the fight. The mystery that follows Ned's assassination signifies how sacrificial heroism has a lasting impact in and on society. Jane Pittman explains:

...they picked up Ned and laid him on top the lumber. The lumber was red when they got home. Blood dripped through the lumber on the ground. A trail of blood all the way from where Ned was shot clear up to his house. Even the rain couldn't wash the blood away. For years and years, even after they had graveled the road, you could still see little black spots where the blood had dropped. (E. J. Gaines, 1993, p. 116)

Through Ned's assassination, nature seems to have sent a message of eternity that even human actions could not delete the sacrifices of the hero. Yet, it is the people's reactions, after hearing the news, that reveal the lasting impact of Ned's sacrifice:

When the people heard the news they started crying. The ones living side the road followed the wagon to the house. When the others came in from the field and heard what had happened they knelt down right there and cried. They didn't want to near him when he was living, but when they heard he was dead they cried like children. They ran up to the wagon when it stopped at the gate. They wanted to touch his body. They wanted to help take it inside. Thee road was full, people comig from everywhere. They wanted to touch his body. When they couldn't touch his body they took lumber from the wagon. The wanted a piece of lumber with his blood on it. (E.J. Gaines, 1971, p. 116)

Like the Christ's blood which represents hope, love and eternity for Christians, Ned's triggers compassion, attachment and perhaps a promise to make use of his teachings even after his death. Through Ned, Gaines demonstrates that meaningful change demands not only awareness, but also the willingness to risk – and ultimately to give – one's life for the liberation of others.

Across both novels, Ernest Gaines emphasizes that sacrificial heroism functions as a transformative force at both individual and collective levels. Their acts dismantle the psychological and structural legacies of domination, perceptible in Jefferson's attorney's discourse, by producing new models of black identity grounded in courage and self-affirmation. To some extent, Gaines suggests that lasting change is neither immediate nor without cost; it requires individuals who are willing to sacrifice themselves through resistance and death, so that their martyrdom becomes the foundation upon which future freedom is built.

2-Transformative Pedagogy and Emancipation

In *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines suggests that not any type of education is worthwhile for the black community. For education to be effective and bring about change, it must go beyond formal schooling and not limit literacy to mechanical reading and writing. Through the figures of Grant Wiggins and Ned Douglass, Ernest J. Gaines promotes a transformative, socially conscious, and liberating literacy, one that combines intellectual development with moral courage and public responsibility.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, it is actually when Grant turns from the conventional, abstract and somewhat colonialist teaching pattern to Paulo Freire's "liberation pedagogy", as discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), that Jefferson begins his transformation from a dehumanized figure into a self-aware and dignified man. At the beginning of the novel,

Jefferson has internalized the racist discourse imposed on him by white society, especially after being called a “hog” during his trial.

Grant Wiggins begins as a disillusioned teacher trapped in a rigid, irrelevant educational system. In the story, two aspects account for Grant’s disappointment, the ineffectiveness of his teaching and the structural disinterest in the Black community plantation school: the physical conditions of the school premises and the superintendent’s visit.

Grant’s teaching environment is deeply inadequate. The school is a converted church with broken furniture, scarce supplies, and outdated textbooks handed down from white schools. This is not casual shortage but rather structural neglect. The children are expected to learn in a space that implicitly tells them they are unworthy of investment. From a Postcolonialist perspective, this environment functions as a tool of domination: it maintains Black subordination by restricting access to meaningful knowledge and resources. Education, instead of being liberating, becomes a mechanism of containment.

The superintendent’s visit intensifies this assessment. On the surface, the visit appears to be an official inspection, suggesting reinforcement and concern. But in reality, it is superficial. The students recite memorized verses to create the illusion of learning, while the deeper realities (intellectual stagnation, lack of critical thinking, and emotional disengagement) remain unaddressed. At the end, the superintendent rather validates the system as he hypocritically congratulates Grant for doing a good job: “Higgins, I must compliment you. You have an excellent crop of students, an excellent crop, Higgins. You ought to be proud” (E. J. Gaines, 1993, p. 56). The superintendent’s presence reinforces a ladder in which Black education is monitored but not meaningfully supported.

As a result, the school cannot effect real change because it does not aim at transformation, but only at minimal compliance. The children may learn to repeat information, but they are not empowered to question, resist, or redefine their condition. That is precisely why Grant’s later shift toward human-centered teaching is so significant. It occurs outside the logic of the institution.

Rooted in formal schooling, his initial model of education proves ineffective because it is disconnected from Jefferson’s lived reality. Actually, his early teaching lacks purpose because it is disconnected from the lived realities of his students and community. However, when Grant shifts toward a human-centered pedagogy (one based on empathy, dialogue, and recognition), education becomes transformative. Instead of teaching Jefferson how to read and write in a conventional sense, Grant teaches him how to see himself as a man. Through his relationship with Jefferson, he undergoes a transformation moving away from basic instruction

toward a deeply human, dialogic form of teaching, one centered on restoring dignity, self-worth, and moral and human agency. This echoes Paulo Freire's viewpoint that true liberation emanates from the oppressed taking agency and actively taking part in the transformation of society, where education fosters critical awareness and self-worth rather than passive absorption of knowledge.

Thus, clearly, it is the liberation pedagogy that transforms Jefferson by restoring his subjectivity. It allows him to move from being an object of oppression to a subject of his own story, demonstrating that true education is not about information, but about asserting one's humanity in the face of dehumanizing forces. Gaines suggests that education must be culturally relevant, ethically grounded, and responsive to lived Black experience if it is to produce genuine transformation. This resonates with Post-colonialism at two levels. On the one hand, it represents a critique of how dominant knowledge systems marginalize colonized or oppressed peoples. On the other hand, it shows how Freire's liberatory education (that is, education where learning emerges from dialogue, consciousness, and social reality rather than top-down instruction) operates and redeems.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Ned's school is also a vector of liberation. It is utterly opposed to the classical plantation schools of the South, with regard to its taught content. Unlike the white-controlled ones which help maintain the status quo and racial dichotomy, Ned intends his to propel the Black race forward, both intellectually and socially. He argues that his school must encompass the ideological and cognitive aspirations of the Black community. He has a better dream:

I want to see some of my children to become lawyers. I want to see some of my children to become ministers of the Bible; some write books; some to represent their people in the law...Working with your hands while the white man write all the rules and laws will not better your lot.' (E. J. Gaines, 1971, p. 111)

Ned's teaching is explicitly political and community-oriented from the start. He rejects the kind of schooling designed to keep Black people subordinate and instead teaches children (and the broader community) to understand their history, their worth, and their right to resist oppression. His lessons go beyond literacy: they cultivate racial consciousness, dignity, historical consciousness, racial pride and the courage to challenge injustice. In this sense, Ned already practices what Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy, because he sees education as a tool for awakening critical consciousness and inspiring action. Ned's characterization stems from Gaines's conviction that the South does not need physical violence but careful teaching, as he tells Tom Carter in an interview:

Growing up in the South, I knew the last thing in the world that whites wanted to see was humanity, was to do something positive. Some guys get angry and go to a punching bag. As they are jabbing at it they're developing their muscles, they are getting sharper. I try to use the anger in a positive way, to create a lasting punch, one that will have a longer effect than just screaming or call somebody an MF or son of a bitch. (T. Carter, 1995, p. 84)

Gaines's lasting punch is what Ned incarnates in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and what the duo of Grant Wiggins and Jefferson has powerfully put in process in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Taken together, these two figures illustrate that effective teaching in Gaines's fiction is not neutral or purely academic. It is a form of cultural and political empowerment. Literacy must go beyond technical competence to become what postcolonial theorists would call a counter-discursive practice, that is, a means for the oppressed to reclaim agency, rewrite their narratives, and resist dominant ideologies. In this sense, both Grant and Ned demonstrate that the most impactful education is one that produces not just literate individuals, but conscious subjects capable of redefining themselves and their world.

3 – The Power of Writing

Gaines's conviction that writing is an outstanding key for black communities' struggle to emancipation and full humanity is fully addressed in his last novel, *A Lesson before Dying*. By juxtaposing Jefferson's initial public image (before the issuing of the diary) and his final one (after the issuing of the diary), Gaines powerfully shows how writing moves a person from insignificance and invisibility to prominence and visibility. Indeed, Jefferson starts as a trifling individual, whose only life purpose, as he used to believe, was to serve the white people and to undergo humiliations. In a conversation with Grant Wiggins, he once complains that he has always been "Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Work for nothing. Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that's how it was s'pose to be (...) Thought [he] was doing what the Lord had put [him] on this earth to do" (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p.224). Far from being casual, Jefferson's low self-esteem is the result of the constant degrading practices and discourses that Jefferson and his fellows witness all time. For example, during the trial Jefferson's own attorney's descriptions reduce his life purpose to that of performing menial jobs:

What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. That s what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder (...) What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p. 8)

When Jefferson internalizes the white lawyer's zoomorphic descriptions, he becomes silent, withdrawn, stripped of identity and deprived of his self-worth. His image is that of a trivial individual whom anyone can tread upon. But, the diary interrupts this imposed silence. Even though his entries are grammatically clumsy, it marks the emergence of a voice that had been denied legitimacy. In postcolonial terms, Jefferson is reclaiming narrative authority – writing himself into existence rather than being written by oppressive discourses.

Jefferson's diary is not just a narrative device; it is a radical act of self-reclamation. Through writing, he moves from being defined by a racist legal system to defining himself. In doing so, Ernest J. Gaines suggests that literacy is a crucial pathway to both psychological emancipation and restored humanity. Unless the black individual writes, his inner world and his perceptions will remain hidden to the rest of humanity. Consequently, Jefferson's mutation is Gaines's request to Southern rural black communities in particular, and to African American communities in general, to integrate writing as a strategic key in the struggle for real emancipation and full humanity.

Jefferson's diary very much functions as a mediation to claim humanity. As the entries progress, the journal becomes a space of counter-discourse. By writing at all, Jefferson is already contradicting the lawyer's argument. The attorney had denied him rationality, moral awareness, and emotional depth – yet, the diary displays all three. Jefferson reflects on his relationships (especially with Miss Emma and Grant), expresses fear and confusion, and gradually articulates a sense of responsibility. These are unmistakably human traits. Even his imperfect spelling reinforces authenticity rather than deficiency. It shows a mind actively struggling to express itself, not the absence of one. By exhibiting fear, remorse, love, frustrations, Jefferson's journal proves he is endowed with the humanity that is in us all: the universal innate capacity for compassion, the inalienable dignity and life. More significantly, the diary charts Jefferson's movement toward self-recognition. He begins to see that he matters to others and that his death can carry meaning. His desire to “walk like a man” to the execution chamber is not imposed from outside – it is internalized and chosen. The final entries reveal dignity, empathy, and moral clarity, directly contradicting the image of the animal incapable of understanding life or death.

To that extent, the diary is not just a response, but a refutation. It dismantles the attorney's claim from within, using Jefferson's own voice as evidence. Where the courtroom discourse objectified him, the diary re-subjectifies him. Where the legal system silenced him, writing restores his agency. The diary becomes a symbolic trial in which Jefferson testifies on his own behalf, this time successfully. If the first trial denied his humanity and made him the evident

culprit, the diary functions as an alternative verdict in which he has the opportunity to give his own version of the facts. In one of the final entries, Jefferson clarifies: “I aint had no bisnes goin ther wit brother and bear cause they aint no good an im gon be meetin them soon” (E. J. Gaines, 1993, p.233)

Writing has offered him the room to disclaim the biased condemnation of the white community and appears as a subtle means show Whites their own inhumanity. Until the argument to put hogs in the electric chair is unchallenged, the white community will remorselessly continue the unfair executions. Anyway, it is animals that are executed. But, once Jefferson proves his humanity by exteriorizing feelings that we all share, there are chances that unfair condemnations take end. Trying to convince Jefferson to shift to a more dignified posture, Grant argues that a show of humanity “would destroy their [Whites] myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. as long as none of us stand, they’re safe” (E. J. Gaines, 1993, p. 192). So Gaines sees writing as an extraordinary lever of redemption and change that the black community cannot afford to discard.

The importance of writing clearly appears in the novel from the moment when the symbols of writing are introduced in the story: the notebook and the pencil. Although they look simple, ordinary and insignificant, they carry a quiet, subversive power. The moment Grant places the pencil and notebook in his hands, Jefferson is given the means to speak for himself. They symbolize intellectual and existential activity. The pencil allows Jefferson not just to record thoughts, but to form them. As he writes, he begins to think differently about himself, about others, and about his situation. Interestingly, power here is not physical or institutional (which he lacks), but internal: the ability to interpret one’s own life. As for the notebook, it becomes a space of ownership. Everything else in Jefferson’s life, including his body, his time, and even his death, is controlled by others. But the notebook is his. Within its pages, he is not the hog defined by the court; he is a thinking and feeling subject. This symbolic ownership counters the historical dispossession of Black people, especially in the Southern context that Gaines portrays.

Becoming an alternative form of testimony, one that cannot be interrupted, distorted, or dismissed, writing generates a strong power in the hands of he who writes. In that sense, the tools function not only as instruments of resistance against a system that denies Black subjectivity, but also stand as a source of influence. Once Jefferson is seen with these tools, every jailer starts negotiating so as to be positively reported in the diary. The Sheriff, Old Clark,

Pichot, Morgan and Paul Bonin are now struggling to show him some humanity that would change their image in the “epistle”¹ (H. Beavers, 1995, p. 96). Jefferson notes,

The shef an mr picho and mr morgan come in the cell today an mr picho ax me how im doin an i tell him im doing all rite an he say yes he can see im allrite an he ax me if he can do somthin for me an i tell him nosir im all rite an he ax if i want a brand new new pencil with a penny erase on it an i tol him i wud take the pencil but i dont need the erase cause you tol me to jus put down anything come in my hed an if it aint rite jus scratch over it an go on an he say yes he can see that an he ax me if i want him to shopen my pencil an i say yesir an he shopen the pencil on a teeny perl hanle nife an i look at the nife an i see mr picho look up at shef guiry an mr mogan an the shef look back at him but mr mogan never stop lookin at me like he was tryin to figer me an mr picho ax me if i want the little nife an i tell him yesir i didn mind an he unhook the little gole chan from his belt lope an han me the nife an the chan an he say it was all mine an i say just for a few days...(E. J. Gaines, 1993, p. 229)

Knowing that Jefferson holds in his hands the instruments that can allow him to leave accounts, the usually authoritative Sheriff Guidry becomes suddenly mild and compassionate. There is a sudden shift of stances as the usually strong oppressors’ interior begins to crack. Actually, this dynamic signals a reversal of power at the symbolic level. Through the act of writing, Jefferson acquires something the jailers do not control: the power to judge, to represent, and to remember. The diary transforms him from object to subject. Now, it is he who observes, interprets, and potentially immortalizes them. In that sense, the jailers’ concern about how they will appear in his writing acknowledges his newly acquired authority as a narrator. Ernest J. Gaines uses this to show that literacy can invert traditional hierarchies, at least on the level of meaning and memory. Jefferson also reports how people who bet on his inhumanity (Pichot and Morgan) start treating him with kindness:

ole clark been comin roun too tryin to act like a youman but i can see in his face he aint good an i dont even look at him when he ax me if im doin all rite and can git me somthin no i jus go on ritin in my tablet an i dont care if he do see it after im dead and gone. (E. J. Gaines, 1993, p. 229)

If Jefferson can now offer to ignore a white man, it is because he holds in his hands something that will speak for him. Therefore, the pencil and the notebook quintessentially symbolize power not because they can change Jefferson’s external fate, but because they transform his internal reality. They enable him to move from silence to speech, from imposed identity to self-definition, and from dehumanization to dignity.

¹ Beavers notes that Jefferson’s diary is like a letter, an epistle. Like the epistles of The New Testament, which “are letters to a particular community or individual addressing a particular situation, set of issues, or problem,”

Definitely, the diary reveals that writing should not be about showing elite and Whites' standards of education, but about expressing lived experience. Education should neither be alienating as seen in Grant Wiggins's early teaching, nor elitist. It should rather be about "show[ing] that common humanity that is in us all." (E.J. Gaines, 1993, p. 192) It should permit to achieve moral and existential transformation and therefore be a pathway to humanity.

From a postcolonial perspective, this act resonates with the idea that colonial and racist systems silence subaltern voices. Jefferson's diary becomes a counter-discourse which resists erasure and prints Black existence into history. At the outset, Jefferson embodies what Frantz Fanon theorizes in *Black Skin, White Masks* as the internalization of colonial discourse: having been called a "hog" by the white legal system, he initially accepts this dehumanizing identity, illustrating the depth of epistemic violence inflicted upon the Black subject he is. However, the act of writing initiates a gradual reversal of this process. Through his diary, Jefferson shifts from being an object of racist representation to a subject capable of self-articulation, thereby reclaiming control over his own narrative. In one sense, this transformation aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument in *Decolonising the Mind* that language and writing are central tools of domination, but also of liberation. In another, it illustrates what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the problem of the subaltern's voice in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. The subaltern is often denied access to platforms of expression. Jefferson, as a poor Black man in the Jim Crow South, fits this condition. Even though, his diary does not give him public power, but it creates a space where the subaltern *can* speak, even if it should only be in a limited, fragile way.

Conclusion

Examining *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying* from a postcolonialist perspective, the study has eventually led to the identification of three major keys to emancipation and humanity. Gaines suggests that in order to overturn the trends of race relations in the rural South, black males must go beyond simple manhood (that often leaves the problems unsolved) to adopt sacrificial heroism. Equating it with martyrdom, he suggests that such deaths do not mean endpoints, but represent the beginning of something new. Actually, Gaines has always believed that something has to die for something else to arise. Once blacks are able to project such an image, they can successfully redefine their identity. However, Gaines is persuaded that a thorough revolution, emancipation and the emergence of full humanity are impossible without education. Therefore, he exhorts black communities to a change of educational paradigms, from conventional and colonialist curricula to a pedagogy that builds on the black communities' experience, realities and aspirations. A teaching that does not focus

on identity, love, caring, and dignity cannot effect change. To emancipate from servitude, Gaines suggests that Blacks must take hold of their instruction by appropriating the institutions that generate knowledge. Yet to be considered full humans, Gaines advocates a third essential key: writing. By writing, Blacks offer themselves spaces to tell their own version of facts which gives them the opportunity to disclaim some of the stereotypes that have been used to define them. Writing would also come as a demonstration of humanity against the rural South Whites' arguments of the Black person's lack of human abilities. It is through writing that the foundations upon which the White community enslaves and executes Blacks are shattered and it is through writing that a person's inner world is revealed.

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