

## Crossing the Threshold of Racial Politics: Copper Laurent's Journey from Invisibility to Power in Ernest J. Gaines's "Bloodline"

Lillie Anne Brown\*

**Abstract:** Ernest J. Gaines's work articulates the social, political, and economic position of society's most vulnerable citizens: the poor, voiceless, disenfranchised, and invisible. As he writes openly and passionately about the common people of his childhood, the most critical aspect of the works in his canon is the impact of racism upon black men and the overall effect it has on the black family. In "Bloodline," the title narrative in the **Bloodline** (1968) collection of short stories, Copper Laurent, the bi-racial adult child of a black sharecropper and the plantation's overseer, returns to the plantation of his birth to confront a member of the Laurent dynasty and to claim his rightful place in the family. His is met with resistance from the remaining male Laurent. This paper examines Copper Laurent's rise from invisibility to power as he tackles the racial rules of the land, embattles social mores, and confronts a systemic code of conduct in his quest for acknowledgement of his "birthrights."

**Keywords:** Miscegenation. Racial Politics. Plantation Politics.

As Ernest J. Gaines advances the theme of manhood, dignity, and identity politics in his **Bloodline** (1968) volume, the title story, published in 1968, takes on a more urgent bearing: the effects of the splintered family upon black men's psyche. Copper Laurent, the central figure in "Bloodline," might initially be seen as a tragic "mulatto figure" because of his mixed-raced heritage. Yet Gaines's treatment of Copper's legacy allows the young man to emerge beyond the traditional characterization of the poor, disenfranchised, bi-racial child often depicted in literary works such as William Wells Brown's novel "Clotel; or The President's Daughter" and Kate Chopin's short story "Desiree's Baby." As the son of a racist plantation overseer and black sharecropper, Copper is a psychologically scarred young man who navigates between two

---

\* Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Department of English. Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, FL.

<i>Revista Língua &amp; Literatura</i>	FW	v. 12	n. 18	p. 67-82	Ago. 2010. Recebido em: 01 jun. 2010. Aprovado em: 30 jul. 2010.
--	----	-------	-------	----------	---

cultures: a world of white privilege and class, which he literally desires to enter - on his own terms - and one of subservient labor, stunted economics, and racial warfare, of which he is a part.

Paradoxically, to gain entrance into the world of white privilege and class he must literally acquiesce to one of the Old South's most prevailing, racist practices: Blacks who wish to enter the private residences of prominent, middle class or lower class whites must do so through a rear entrance. To enter the premises through the central door gives weight to the notion that the visitor is of the identical class stature and prominence as the white occupants of the home. Frank Laurent, Copper's paternal uncle, mandates by custom, legacy, and code of honor, the back-door order. Not only is Frank Laurent historically bound by segregationist rules that dictate the practice, he feels morally and culturally obligated to adhere to the practice as well. Copper's refusal to subordinate himself to the practice - while maintaining a sense of pride and dignity in the face of adversity, however, - is one of Gaines' signature motifs that transports itself throughout his oeuvre.

Even though the initial mental struggle between Copper and Frank Laurent centers on the manner of Copper's physical entrance to the Laurent home, the underlying rift between the two men operates through the rubric of change versus a static social order. As critic Karen Carmean notes, ". . . the struggle between the uncle and nephew isn't so much about differences as about likeness" (GAINES, p. 150). Frank Laurent sees himself as the voice of historical authority while Copper views himself as a symbol of emerging power. Due to Copper's conflicted racial status and other unresolved issues he has become greatly disillusioned with his status and place in life. The disillusionment, begun during his early childhood and advanced in his adult life, serves a dual function: It enables him to dismiss many forms of rational thinking, but it also empowers him to construct an identity according to his own making. Copper Laurent is determined that he will be forced to be reckoned with.

As Gaines was greatly influenced by the work of William Faulkner, the resemblance to plot developments in the stories involving Faulkner's Sutpen and Compson families is evident in "Bloodline." Of Faulkner's influence, Gaines says:

". . . We [Faulkner and I] write about the South, the Mississippi borders, Louisiana. Some of the same kind of characters you'd find in Faulkner's small towns, hanging around the storefronts, working in the fields, you'd find the same sort of characters in

Louisiana. Faulkner made me concentrate more on my characters. He showed me how similar they were, white or black characters in a field...[W]hen it came down to writing about peasant life, life in the fields, or life in a small town among the very poor people... Faulkner had that kind of influence..." (GAINES, 2006).

While Gaines's canon prominently addresses issues of father and son separations and the ensuing effects thereof, the theme of the absent father is not a Faulknerian influence. In crediting Faulkner with affecting his writing, he also discounts Faulkner's philosophical influence, opting instead to find his own literary voice:

"I definitely don't go along with Faulkner's philosophy; his description of the characters, yes. He's a master at capturing that southern dialogue, whether it's black or white, but it was a certain level of dialogue that Faulkner was interested in. When it came to philosophy and when it came to my characters reacting, it was my judgment about how my characters would react, not Faulkner's... [T]here were a lot of similarities, but when you get down to the nitty-gritty, there were some differences there" (GAINES, 2006).

The motif of father and son estrangement is particularly acute in "Bloodline," because Copper is the product of abandonment by two men of diverse racial, economic, and social backgrounds. On the one hand is Walter Laurent, the now-deceased overseer of the Laurent Plantation, who is Copper's white, biological father. In Walter Laurent's lifetime he never acknowledged Copper as a legitimate offspring, even though the knowledge of his infidelities among the community of plantation laborers was widespread. On the other end of the paternal spectrum is Copper's black stepfather - nameless throughout the narrative - who quickly expels Copper from the family home upon the death of Copper's mother. The stepfather was, according to Copper, ". . . tired of supporting a white man's child" (GAINES, 1968, p. 212).

As Copper battles the fault lines between two cultural worlds, the theme of miscegenation remains central to the development of the narrative. In fact, the stepfather's reference to Copper's ethnicity - as well as his (Copper's) literal dismissal from the family unit - serves as the catalyst for Copper's desire *for* and journey *to* power. He claims that he "always knew" (p. 211) who his father was but he also acknowledges that he "couldn't say a thing about it" (p. 212), because to do so would break an unwritten, racial code of speaking out against the casual rape of and violence against black women by white overseers. Most significant, however, it would also invite economic hardship among plantation workers and residents of the community. Speaking openly of sexual liaisons between the powerless and the powerful could, he claims, "have gotten me in

Revista Lingua & Literatura. Frederico Westphalen, v. 12, n. 18, p. 67-82. Dez. 2009.

trouble, and probably gotten my mother in more trouble" (p. 212). Life, in Copper's world, is as much a matter of humbly acknowledging the sexual exploitation of black women as it is learning to survive against all odds.

By virtue of their muted voices, the male fieldworkers who cultivate the Laurent land as well as the sharecroppers who live in the shanties owned by the Laurents contribute indirectly to the sexual exploitation and abuse of female plantation workers. It is to the fieldworkers' and sharecroppers' economic advantage to refrain from speaking out against the landowner on behalf of the women, because to do so would jeopardize their physical place on the land, disrupt their own family unit, and cause strife and turmoil among members of their immediate community. To remain silent is to ensure immediate survival, but it also ensures survival for future generations of plantation workers.

While "Bloodline" is the only short story in Gaines's repertoire which directly addresses the topic of miscegenation, **Catherine Carmier** (1964), a novel involving Bradley, a dark-skinned black man, and Catherine, a beautiful Creole woman whose father rejects all dark-skinned people, comes closest to addressing this issue of the "tragic mulatto." The narrative trajectory of **Bloodline** balances the youthful adventures of Sonny, the six-year-old central character in "A Long Day in November" and James, the eight-year-old main figure in "The Sky is Gray," with the insight gained by Proctor Lewis, the nineteen-year-old incarcerated man in "Three Men," to chronicle the tumultuous life of Copper Laurent. Gaines's treatment of the splintered family unit and the masculine sphere comes full circle with the chronicling of Copper Laurent's story of desertion, identity, and power.

Unlike Sonny, the six-year-old central character in "A Long Day in November," the first narrative in the **Bloodline** volume, Copper does not emerge from a place of solidarity with the hope of a fairytale ending of familial reunification. His family structure is already physically, psychologically, and emotionally fragmented. While Gaines does not present evidence in the novel that Copper overtly resents his stepfather, nothing suggests that Copper is emotionally attached to him. The stepfather does not have a major presence in the story, but his emotional impact upon Copper is felt throughout the narrative. The few words attributed to the stepfather are presented through the voice of Copper; thus, it is Copper's emotional intake of his stepfather's resistance to him that the reader must rely upon for verification of the stepfather's vindictive behavior. While much of Copper's psychological state centers upon his eviction from the family

Revista Lingua & Literatura. Frederico Westphalen, v. 12, n. 18, p. 67-82. Dez. 2009.

home, the "reported speech" of his stepfather serves as the psychological tie that weds Copper to his own emotional turmoil.

Throughout the narrative Copper does not reference his stepfather by name, referring to him instead as his "mother's husband" (p. 212). The explicit phrase suggests that Copper's strong detachment from his stepfather serves as a psychological barrier between him and the possibility that a stepfather/son relationship could ever exist. The reference also infers that early in the mother's and stepfather's marital association Copper makes a decision to permanently dismiss and disassociate himself from the stepfather who is not of his own bloodline.

The stepfather's namelessness throughout the novel suggests that there are faceless and unidentified black men who often abandon their sons and families on a level of consistency but continue to function undisturbed in their own lives. Gaines partly attributes this level of abandonment and neglect to the historical legacy of slavery wherein families in general - and fathers and sons in particular - were separated during slavery and have been unable, since that time, to sustain meaningful relationships. The passage of time, theorizes Gaines, has not fostered a psychological or physical reunification and therein lies the familial and parental disconnect between fathers and sons. According to Gaines:

"Fathers and sons were brought here in chains and then separated on the auction block in slave-holding places. I don't think they've made a connection since. Too often our fathers cannot help the sons. African American fathers do not send us to war. They're very seldom our judges when we're standing at trial... We often blame him without realizing that he's never been given that opportunity to defend us (GAINES, 2006).

Copper's stepfather's conduct - the expulsion of Copper from the family home - reopens a wound of neglect caused by his birth father and makes his emotional healing much more prominent and his journey of validation and visibility significantly more urgent.

While there is no evidence in the narrative that Copper possesses an apparent hatred of his stepfather, he does, however, harbor a negative and distressing image of him. He remarks that his "supposed-to-be-father had been too nutless to say I wasn't his while we lived in the South" (p. 212), but he acknowledges that his mother's ". . . husband's name was the name I carried up until recently" (p. 212). Copper's continued refusal to use his stepfather's surname further suggests that the decision to abandon the stepfather's last name speaks not only to his [Copper's] determination to forge an identity apart from a man who has little compassion and no respect

for him, but the decision is also a symbolic action that thrusts the abandonment back to the person who has relinquished the responsibilities of fatherhood. Copper, in this act, becomes the architect of his own identity.

His need to proclaim that he knows who his "real" father is while at the same time rejecting his "supposed-to-be-father" (p. 212) further suggests that at a young age he internalized notions of manhood and fatherhood and the inherent responsibilities one should take when assuming each role. The instant he discards his stepfather's name and literally strikes out on his own he begins to feel a sense of power and self-validation. His "abandonment" of his stepfather's name parallels Gaines' theme of fathers as the engineers of their own disappearing acts. Although Copper, a young man without children of his own, has been forced to leave the family home, his leaving also begins what can be seen as a historical and generational act of disappearing.

It is significant that Copper refrains from using a more refined adjective to identify his stepfather's inability to display character, integrity, and nobility in his association with him. He sexualizes his stepfather's lack of integrity, which suggests that his pseudo-father, like Walter Laurent, his real-life father, lacked the paternal fortitude to withstand the myriad duties and obligations that manhood requires and represents, choosing abandonment over responsibility. The reference also alludes to the sexualization, rejection, disregard, and disrespect of Copper's mother by Walter Laurent. In conversation with Frank Laurent, Copper recounts a childhood memory in which he observes his mother and father engaged in a sexual act on the grounds of the Laurent plantation. The memory of what he witnesses has great emotional impact for Copper:

". . . one day in the field we were picking up potatoes. I had gone to the bayou to get some water out of the barrel. When I came back to the row where my mother and I were working, wasn't there. I asked where she was, and a woman -- I forget who she was -- started laughing at me. I walked away crying, looking for my mother. I found them in another patch of ground. Walter Laurent on top of her. They didn't see me, but that night I told her one day I was going to kill him. That's why we moved from here" (p. 212).

As Copper views what he perceives to be an assault upon his mother, his sense of emasculation -- because of his inability to defend and protect her -- leads to a feeling of inadequacy. His emasculation began early in life and retains an emotional hold upon him as he matures. "A black woman," claims Felix, the long-suffering servant in the Laurent household and the story's narrator, "no matter who she was, didn't have a chance if he [Walter Laurent] wanted

*Revista Lingua & Literatura. Frederico Westphalen, v. 12, n. 18, p. 67-82. Dez. 2009.*

her. He didn't care if it was in the field, in the quarters, the store or that house" (p. 162). "That house" is the same house which Frank Laurent now controls and whose rear door Copper refuses to enter. In his youthful threat to kill Walter Laurent, Copper replaces one notion of manhood with another concept of what it should be: taking responsibility, caring, and nurturing a child who has not yet reached adulthood, directing him to a safe and responsible place in society, and acknowledging him in life. He recognizes that his youthful age did not deter his ouster from his parents' home. He asserts that he was "fourteen years old then. A fourteen year old black child out on his own" (p. 212). The center of much of Copper's bravado and determination rests upon his ability to survive in the world without benefit of parental guidance, love, and support.

Copper's dismissal from his home leads him to acknowledge that he has "not a soul in the world to turn to, not one" (p. 212). His proclamation echoes the sentiments expressed by Proctor Lewis, the nineteen-year-old prisoner in "Three Men," the center narrative in **Bloodline**. While Proctor Lewis can claim a temporary surrogate family in the protective sphere of Hattie and Munford Bazille, veteran criminals with whom he not only shares a physical space but an emotional space as well, Copper does not have a unit of support. As the lone figure unable to claim a parental heritage and paternal birthright that he can rightfully and proudly acknowledge, his need for patriarchal legitimacy is understandable. While Amalia, Copper's mother's sister (and the Laurents' longtime house servant), voices her opposition to Frank Laurent's mandate that her nephew obey "the rules," she is as powerless to effect change as is Felix and the plantation's sharecroppers who witness the sexual exploitation and physical abuse on a daily basis. Amalia voices her opinions to Felix regarding the conditions and rules surrounding the Laurent household, but her voice - in keeping with the rules of the Old South and grand sphere of subservience - is mute.

Copper must look outside himself for self-validation. His abandonment, asserts critic Valerie Babb, leaves him "a solitary character groping for self-identification" (GAINES, p. 32). His splintered family, she further maintains, "provides no sanctuary along a quest for self complicated by being neither black nor white" (p. 33). While Copper does not see himself as a "victim" of the "one-drop" rule, a colloquial term which emerged during the era of the Jim Crow South which classified anyone with one black ancestor, regardless of how far back, *as black*, he sees himself as an outsider.

Copper's declaration of his nomadic lifestyle suggests that he understands the fractious relationship between father and son and the ensuing damage it causes. He typifies his wanderings and consciously aligns himself with the countless number of "suffering" and displaced men who are, in his estimation, "without birthrights" (GAINES, 1968, p. 213).

"For the last ten years I've been everywhere... I've seen a little bit of everything in this world, but suffering more than anything else... [T]here're millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me. And who is to blame?... [M]en like my father. Men like Walter Laurent... [T]he suffering, the suffering, the suffering" (p. 213).

Clearly, Copper, as does Proctor Lewis who comments similarly in his cell, is affected by the loss of his mother, the absence of his "real" father, and the home life to which he had become partially accustomed. His disillusionment with life manifests itself in the collective voices of black men whose lives are also disrupted by similar circumstances of familial displacement. His level of frustration is evident as he declares: "I've been in all the cities... [Y]es, and I've been in prison. How many times have I heard weeping in those cells... We didn't even ask to be born. I, myself, was conceived in a ditch..." (p. 213). He sees his conception in a ditch as his first "lowly" place in life. It is he who must rise out of this place of abjection to a more lofty position of prominence and visibility and in the process claim his rightful place in the world.

As Copper converses with Frank following his [Frank's] journey to the Laurent plantation, Frank Laurent presents himself as a victim of racial politics and cultural warfare. Though he claims to have suffered because of his own family's legacy and racist policies and practices on the plantation, his "suffering" does not dissuade his adherence to the rules of law. As he has previously proclaimed to his in-house servants, Copper will "come through that back door, and he'll be glad to come through that back door" (p. 176), he now begins, in light of Copper's refusal to acquiesce to his mandate that he enter through the rear, to engage an introspection and reveal a humanistic side. While there is no clear evidence in the narrative to suggest that nothing far more than a sense of guilt prompts a miniscule change in Frank, it must also be noted that his guilt does not arise from a moral consciousness. Neither does it translate into immediate action. He is still, at the end of the day, a Laurent, and to this end he must remain true to the dynasty, historical legacy, and racist practices of the family's heritage.



At the servants' earlier suggestion that Frank allow Copper to "slip in tonight sometime" (p. 199), Frank expounds upon the unyielding law of the land:

"Even if they [the Cajuns] didn't lynch him, I wouldn't let him come in through that front door. Neither him, nor you [Felix] nor her [Amalia] over there. And to me she is only the second woman I've had the good fortune of knowing whom I can call a lady. But she happens to be black, Felix, and because she's black she'll never enter this house through that door. Not while I'm alive.

He continues to expound upon the explicit nature of "the rules" by which he will continue to abide and enforce:

"Because, you see, Felix, I didn't write the rules. I came and found them, and I shall die and leave them. They will be changed, of course; they will be changed, and soon, I hope. But I will not be the one to change them (p. 199).

In Frank's subsequent trip to the sharecroppers' plantation to confront Copper regarding the purpose of his intended visit to the Laurent home, Copper, standing above Frank, looks downward at Frank. His "looking down at his uncle" (p. 214) - as he, Frank, sits on the front porch of a sharecropper's home - serves three purposes: It symbolizes a small victory over Frank as his uncle has "reported" to him (and not vice versa), it empowers him as he has remained true to his word that he would not enter the Laurent home through its rear door, and it gives him presence and a strong sense of visibility as he literally "controls" a representative symbol of racial injustice on the very land where he was conceived. His conquest can also be seen most prominently as a victory over class and status: Copper, the lowly, abandoned young man in search of his birthright and heritage, triumphs over the last male symbol of white hierarchy on the plantation. It is, in Copper's estimation, a triumph of magnanimous proportions: "Your days are over, Uncle. . . . It's my time now. And I won't let a thing in the world get in my way" (p. 217).

In his new sense of power he refers to himself as the "General," because he has not only instituted, in his imagination, the impending downfall of Frank Laurent, a representative member of an influential family, but also because he sees himself as the face and voice of the plantation workers who have been silent and silenced. In his opposing reality he references members of the Laurent dynasty as "rapists, murderers, plunderers" (p. 213), who "hid behind the law. The law

they created themselves" (p. 213). By assigning himself the title of "General," he positions himself more prominently than any member of the Laurent family. As the "unacknowledged" Laurent, he must fathom a way to reign supreme over the rules, laws, and racist practices that have governed the plantation for centuries. He must claim this moniker in an effort to move forward on his journey of power and validation.

Just as he literally "looks down" on Frank Laurent, the self-imposed title of "General" provides him with a sense of racial superiority "over" a representative of the system that has mentally enslaved him. Copper owns this scene in the narrative, and it is this dramatic exhibition of ownership that reigns crucial to his sense of power and visibility. "The world made me a General," (p. 214) he says without a hint of irony. Even as he accentuates his blackness, he still seeks to enter the Laurent world of privilege, class, and status. Copper Laurent is indeed a conflicted soul, existing on the edge of two worlds not of his creation. It is to his credit, however, that he appoints and then crowns himself king of each of these worlds.

As Frank speaks to Copper about carrying "the burden of this world on your shoulders" (p. 215), he also acknowledges for the first time the emotional burdens he, too, carries as a Laurent. The weight of upholding racist practices, which he claims to abhor, has taken its toll, and he admits the monumental extent of the damage the practices have taken not only upon him but upon the Laurent legacy as well. While it might be difficult for Frank to admit that the injustices that have been forced upon the subservient class are not solely of his engagement, he does feel an emotional need to offer an explanation of the legacy he has inherited:

"My brother, your father, was wrong. Not only with your mother, but with many other women -- white and black alike. White and black men he also destroyed. Destroyed them physically, destroyed them mentally. I, myself, have suffered from his errors as much as you, as much as any other man has. . . ." (p. 215).

Copper's verbal dismissal of Frank's claim of suffering is powerfully delivered through his [Copper's] continued claim to the Laurent dynasty:

"... [Y]ou have not suffered. . . I'm not one of your niggers running around in the quarters. I'm not one [of] your Cajun sharecroppers. Whether you like it or not, I'm a Laurent. I'm a Laurent, Uncle, and you better remember it" (p. 215).

In Frank's eroding health, Copper is acutely aware of the major force his uncle's death will represent for the plantation workers: Greta Jean Laurent, Walter's white daughter and heir apparent to the Laurent Plantation, will adhere to class conventions that dictate the ouster of the plantation workers and the parceling of the Laurent land to Cajun sharecroppers, resulting in displaced and splintered families on the plantation. While Frank articulates his intentions to "do all I can to make up for what he [his brother, Walter Laurent] did to these here in the quarters" (p. 216), he still maintains the racial stronghold that characterizes the family's legacy:

"I'm going to defend this place with all my strength. I'm going to defend it with my dying breath -- to keep it exactly as it is. And if you come back here again, or with your Army, before the law of the land has been changed to give you those 'birthrights' you've been talking so much about, I would shoot you down the same as I would a mad dog. After I'm dead, laws won't matter to me. You and GretaJean can fight over this piece of rot as long as you both live" (p. 216).

He continues to expound upon the historical legacy of "the rules" and why he feels compelled to adhere to them:

"But as long as I can draw breath, it stays as it is. I did not write these rules and laws you've been talking about; I came here and found them, just as you did. And neither one of us is going to change them, not singly. . . . If you can't live by those rules, then you better get the hell away from here now." (p. 216).

Copper's rejection by his black stepfather makes his need of the Laurent birthright much more urgent. Not only does he seek a real and true identity, he seeks a physical justification for existing. In "A Long Day in November," for example, the culmination of Sonny's day of accompanying his father on his sojourn into the community as the father attempts to regain his position as the family's central figure, is comforting to Sonny and leaves him fully engulfed in the safety and security of home and community. Copper does not possess this level of security and therefore feels justified in seeking a means to achieve it. From his previous claim of being unable to speak openly of the truth of his parentage, he now possesses, in the confidence of his maturity and the fearlessness of his new-found visibility, to speak forthrightly to Frank Laurent about his heritage.

The rejection from his stepfather and his biological father creates the physical and emotional energy needed to confront established social and cultural mores of the Old South.

Even though there is no clear explanation in the novel of the origin of Copper's supposed mental instability, the reader can assume that his emotional state is due in part to his ouster from the family at a young age as well as undisclosed events and circumstances associated with his listless wanderings over the years. As Frank Laurent acknowledges that the life he has lived is slowly coming to an end, he also recognizes that the possibility of change is a historical inevitability. As Copper attempts to secure his legacy by acquiring the Laurent birthright, he also recognizes that bloodlines do not necessarily translate into love, honor, respect, and integrity. Nor, do they, he concludes, supersede rationality.

Recognizing the dichotomy of bloodlines and kinship, Copper proclaims at the culmination of his journey to the plantation, "I'll be back, Uncle. And I'll take my share" (p. 217). He declares with great pride that he "won't beg for it, I won't ask for it; I'll take it. I'll take it or I'll bathe this whole plantation in blood" (p. 217). "Bathing the plantation in blood" is Copper's verbalization of the power that rests in the recognition he has been denied as well as the kinship he knows exists between the women and men of the plantation that have been victimized by the Laurents over the years. The strength and repetition of Copper's claim - "I'll take it. I'll take it . . ." - symbolizes his strong sense of self as well as it represents his public stand against the old plantation ways and the South's resistance to change. His proclamation further indicates that he does not need nor does he seek anyone's permission to be his own man. He is thoroughly aware of who he is and is more than prepared to unleash the power within. In his world there is no place for identity negotiations. Frank Laurent's declining health not only foretells his imminent death, it also symbolizes a dying culture in the Old South.

Like Munford Bazille, the veteran criminal in "Three Men" who offers Proctor Lewis a rambling analysis of the emasculation of black men, Copper offers Frank Laurent a critique of the "barbarity" of racism, injustice, and "the law," ordered and perpetuated by the institution of racism. In response to Frank's idea of racial conformity which rests upon the simplistic nature of using chains and sticks to enforce compliance upon members of an oppressed community, Copper delivers an impassioned soliloquy on the "creation" of slavery and racism:

"Those are your creations, Uncle -- the chains and sticks. You created them four hundred years ago, and you're still using them up to this day. You created them. But they were only a fraction of your barbarity. . . . You used the rope and the tree to hang him. You used the knife to castrate him while he struggled with the rope to catch his breath. You used fire to make him squirm even more, because the hanging and the castration still wasn't enough amusement for you. Then you used something else -- another creation of yours -- that thing you called the law. It was written by you for you and your kind, and any many who was not of your kind had to break it sooner or later. . . I only used a fraction of your creations" (GAINES, 1968, p. 209).

14

As Copper's verbal grandiosity reaches a crescendo he continues to explain the psychological effects of the system's "creations," using the image of a stick and chain to forge a dominant impression against the reality of whips and iron shackles used during slavery to constrain women and men:

"You have imbedded the stick and the chain in their minds for so long, they can't hear anything else... From now on I'll use the simplest words. Simple words, Uncle; a thing you thought they would never understand" (p. 209).

As the sole General in an army of one, Copper no longer depends upon others to protect, validate, and acknowledge his existence. He is in charge of his life and is able to move forward with dignity and pride. His use of the future tense -- in announcing to Frank Laurent that he "will come back... and when I do, she [Amalia] will never have to go through your back door ever again" (p. 217) - signals that his aspirations, though strong, worthy, and admirable are not yet, by narrative's end, realized. Although Copper does not have the support that a unified family or extended family unit can offer, he does possess the inner strength, determination, and perseverance to confront future obstacles with pride, dignity, and respect. The open-ending of "Bloodline" does not bring complete closure to Copper's quest to walk front and center through Frank Laurent's door of racial inequality. It does show, however, that he has waged the battle from invisibility to power on his own terms and that he is neither undaunted or overwhelmed by future challenges that may await him.

## References

BABB, Valeria M. *Ernest J. Gaines*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.

CARMEAN, Karen. *Ernest J. Gaines: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

ESTES, David (Ed.). *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.

GAINES, Ernest. *Catherine Carmier*. New York: Atheneum, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Bloodline*. New York: Dial, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Personal Interview*. 31 May 2006.