

David Squires
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Remembering Ernest Gaines in Louisiana

In 2019 I started working on a series of digital exhibits about novelist Ernest J. Gaines. His papers are housed at my home institution, where he used to teach, as part of the Ernest J. Gaines Center. The idea to create exhibits featuring some of those collections grew out of my teaching. I teach a research methods course for new graduate students and wanted them to learn to engage a literary archive. I also wanted them to practice communicating with non-academic audiences, or at least non-scholarly audiences. The exhibits are aimed at high school and college students as something like an interactive research guide. In the process of completing the first exhibit, I learned from the director of the Gaines Center that the collections are generally underutilized. We started to think of the exhibits as outreach tools and began imagining ways to publicize them beyond the library website.

The main effort has been on putting the exhibits to use in public programming. To that end, I have applied for a Whiting Foundation Public Engagement Grant. An excerpt from the proposal is included below to give a better sense of the project. I have also shared the exhibits with academic audiences. The first exhibit is featured as an assignment in "[Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook](#)." This past year I started presenting on the exhibits at academic conferences. Although helpful for getting feedback, the academic venues have not generated much traffic and are not really the target audience for the public humanities project. I'll be excited to exchange ideas for how to promote projects like this and receive feedback on the project pitch below.

Here are some relevant links:

- [Keys to the Archive: Miss Jane Pittman](#)
- [Keys to the Archive: A Gathering of Old Men](#)
- [A Digital Project Handbook Entry](#)

“Proof that We Ever Was”: Remembering Ernest J. Gaines in Louisiana

Ernest J. Gaines was Louisiana's most prodigious novelist when he died on November 5, 2019. He authored ten books and numerous articles; he earned a National Humanities Medal, a National Medal of the Arts, and the title Chevalier in the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres; he served as Writer-in-Residence at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette for nearly twenty-five years. Most significantly, he left a record of underrepresented rural communities in South Louisiana as, in one character's words, "proof that we ever was." Although internationally renowned, Gaines's fiction continues to represent a minority perspective in South Louisiana. Celebrations of Cajun and Creole culture recognize minority communities associated with European diasporas. The culture and history associated with African diasporas end up doubly marginal, both minoritized by French and Spanish traditions as well as racialized by histories of slavery and Jim Crow. Recent concern over police brutality and the continued presence of

Confederate monuments in the region have sparked renewed efforts to confront legacies racism in South Louisiana. The public discussions this project proposes will build on those efforts by adding a cultural dimension to public engagement.

We propose four public discussions that explore how Gaines's writing addresses issues of contemporary concern in South Louisiana. Each discussion will bring together a cultural institution, community leaders, and materials from the Gaines Center to consider how Gaines's fiction illuminates topical social issues:

- “Soil, Toil, and Sugarcane”: June and Angie Provost (Provost Farm) introduce participants to the experience of Black sugarcane farmers in conversation with *A Gathering of Old Men*.
- “Slavery to Civil Rights”: Fred Prejean (Move the Mindset) leads discussion on slavery and segregation in Lafayette with reference to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.
- “Prison Notebooks”: Norris Henderson and Consuela Gaines (Voice of the Experienced) lead discussion on policing and mass incarceration with *A Lesson Before Dying*.
- “First Drafts”: Cheylon Woods (Gaines Center) and Darrell Bourque (former poet laureate of Louisiana) lead discussion on how Gaines navigated editors and publishing demands to represent South Louisiana.

To facilitate discussion, we plan to introduce participants to the manuscript collections housed at the Ernest J. Gaines Center through exhibition materials. Poster-sized reproductions of his manuscript pages will let participants take a close look at Gaines's earliest drafts, including his handwriting, rough edits, and revision notes. Display tablets will show digital exhibits featuring additional materials from the Gaines Center collections, such as editorial feedback, news clippings, and correspondence. The digital exhibits will also provide historical and critical context for each novel under discussion. Two of the four exhibits currently exist online: [The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman](#) and [A Gathering of Old Men](#). I created those exhibits in collaboration with graduate students who envisioned, researched, and implemented them as a scholarly collective. Each exhibit includes a series of keyword entries that use critical concepts to explain key scenes and archival materials. The exhibits also include interactive features, such as a historical timeline and a map of real-life locations that inspired Gaines's fictional settings. We are in process of building a third exhibit, scheduled to go live in spring 2022. I plan to complete the exhibit of first draft materials during the summer of 2022 in time for our first public book discussions. Participants will be able to explore the exhibits using display tablets or on their own devices using QR code links. In addition to the exhibits, we will set the stage for public discussion by having student performers read excerpts from Gaines's fiction. Vocalizing excerpts will emphasize his unique prose style while also giving participants a common point of reference for discussion.