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Defining Freedom: a Historical Exploration of Richard Wright's Black Boy, Ernest Gaines's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, and Alice Walker's Meridian

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DEFINING FREEDOM: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S
BLACK BOY, ERNEST GAINES'S THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE
PITTMAN, AND ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN

By

Natalie Anne Nations

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
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for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
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Candidate for Degree of Master of Arts

Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, and Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* depict the African American struggle for rights and freedom both before, during, and after the recognized Civil Rights Era. By exploring the novels' definitions of freedom, this work examines how these definitions inform the characters' search for freedom. Using Wright, Walker, and Gaines to follow the freedom struggle from slavery to the post-civil rights era provides a comprehensive, historical framework for understanding the evolving rhetoric of freedom. Reflecting a "long," complicated history of the Civil Rights Movement, these novels obscure a simplified, dichotomous understanding of the movement and provide a multivalent definition of freedom that encompasses both the political and psychological self. Ultimately, this research analyzes how these authors respond to each other and the racial and political climate of their time and examines how the search for freedom changes over time.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to the women and children of Pathways, Inc. in Birmingham, Alabama, who inspired this project.

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Without the encouragement and support of my thesis director, Dr. Ted Atkinson, this project would not be possible. His accomplishments and extensive knowledge in the field of literary scholarship inspire to me to continue future research, and I am honored to have had this opportunity to work with him.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

From pre-abolition to the post-civil rights era, the concept of freedom lies at the heart of African American literature. The Civil Rights Movement’s freedom rhetoric propelled action during its time by encouraging blacks to demand political and liberal freedom and to establish an individual and collective sense of “‘somebodyness’ and ‘self-respect’” (King 27). With a multivalent definition of “freedom,” the Movement sought both human and legal rights for blacks and strove to eliminate prejudice and racism and its negative effects on the collective black psychology. However, this process of understanding and defining the term “freedom” is not confined to the Civil Rights Movement but extends back to the pre-abolitionist period of slavery. As Ernest Gaines illustrates in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the concept—“freedom”—evolved from an unfamiliar term that symbolized a departure from slavery and a future hope to understanding the necessity of overcoming the injustice, racism, and prejudice that prohibited freedom within society and the political arena. Freedom from slavery did not immediately result in American democratic freedom—the freedom to participate as equal citizens in politics and society. The dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement confines the movement to the 1960s as the “one halcyon decade” that began and ended the black freedom struggle in America (Hall 1234). This dominant “historical” narrative ignores the nation’s complicit involvement in segregation and racial oppression by picturing the Movement as a solely Southern struggle. Trying to “make civil rights

harder,” Jacquelyn Dowd Hall identifies a “long civil rights movement” that “took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s” and extends to the “movement of movements” in the 1960s and 1970s (1235). The process of this “long” struggle for civil rights and liberties, however, should span further back in time to encompass a period extending from pre-abolition to the post-civil rights era, including periods of little to no organization to the widespread national movement of the 1960s. With this “long” progression of civil rights struggle, the individual and collective hope (or lack thereof) of attaining freedom and equality reflects the strength or absence of a recognizable movement. Although some scholars criticize this “long” perspective by claiming that the movement loses distinction and thus nearly disappears, I would argue that we lose sight of the movement’s primary origins and stifle its residual progress if we do not extend its scope. Historians and scholars do a disservice to the black freedom struggle by limiting it to set dates within the widely recognized Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Despite these limiting historiographical narratives, literature has played a key role in shaping narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and offers fertile ground for rethinking the scope of the movement, complicating the reductive understanding that has taken root in the popular imagination. By tracing the movement from the despair and isolation of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* to the hope and unity of Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, this thesis explores the impact of various stages in the civil rights struggle on the definitions and search for freedom in the African American freedom journey. Chronicling the journey from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* lends itself to a “long,” expansive exploration of the civil rights struggle and the evolving rhetoric of freedom. Following the novels’ chronology of publication from Wright’s *Black Boy* in 1944 to the 1970s with Gaines’s *Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)

and Walker's *Meridian* (1976) will provide a historical framework for assessing their characters' perception of freedom and the viability of achieving it.

The chronology of the novels' settings and publication dates reveal that Wright's, Gaines's, and Walker's novels are reflective of distinct eras in the civil rights struggle. Although Gaines's *Miss Jane Pittman* covers a span of time that extends to a later time in history than Wright's *Black Boy*, he belongs to the post-civil rights era of the African American literary canon. Nevertheless, Gaines's *Miss Jane Pittman* portrays a period from slavery to the beginnings of the recognized Civil Right Movement that distinguishes it from the stagnant 1930s to 1940s of Wright's *Black Boy* and the period encompassing the Civil Rights Movement and post-civil rights era in Walker's *Meridian*. These distinct periods in history correspond with what Michael G. Cooke considers the four major modes and stages in black American Literature (35). In *The Achievement of Intimacy*, Cooke identifies four stages, Self-veiling, Solitude, Kinship, and Intimacy, which appear to correspond with the progress of the civil rights struggle and to reflect various attitudes toward the attainment of freedom. Although Cooke does not connect the historical setting to his four stages, the progression of stages is chronologically ordered by authors representing each stage in black American literature. Cooke identifies authors exemplifying the first stage, "self-veiling," as members of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, and distinguishes representatives of the second stage, "solitude," as authors, such as Wright and Ellison, who were published during the 1940s and 1950s. Authors representing the "kinship" stage range in publication from the 1940s to the 1970s, and the ultimate stage, "intimacy," began its ascendancy in the 1970s. The historical underpinnings of Cooke's stages help ground a reading of these works in the various years' predominant attitudes toward the promise of a liberating freedom

movement. An examination the novels' competing ideas of freedom and selfhood within a historical and literary framework reveals the role of literature as a means for reflecting and responding to the conditions of the black freedom struggle.

CHAPTER II
THE UNANSWERED CALL FOR FREEDOM IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S BLACK
BOY

Providing an account of the African American experience from the 1910s through the 1940s, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* offers little hope of political and individual freedom for blacks living in America. For Wright, the legal restrictions, societal prejudices, and psychological abuse committed against African Americans appear as overwhelming obstacles to obtaining equality and to developing, for the black collective, a sense of "self-respect" and agency. Wright's search for freedom is a self-directed effort that leads him northward and eventually to membership in the Communist Party. His isolationist endeavors and chronic fear and hatred of the white race constitute his placement by Cooke in the stages of "self-veiling" and "solitude." Cooke identifies the "self-veiling" stage in the narrative characteristics of adaption or the acceptance of the lack of freedom, survival rather than freedom, impersonality, conscious hatred, blaming the whole (American) system, and the perception of restraints imposed upon blacks as denying blacks the ability to free themselves (35-37). Wright's experiences in both the South and the North reveal his "self-veiling" as he seeks to avoid harm by adapting to the Jim Crow order. Wright's criticism of America and membership in the Communist Party expose his discontent with the American system, yet he seems powerless to affect any change to the political restraints and racial prejudice that he identifies. "Solitude" also pervades Wright's narrative from his childhood to adulthood. Cooke recognizes

“solitude” in a character’s relationship with his or her environment: the characters survive without forming any real connections to others, feel discontented from society, and are unable to integrate themselves socially, even when experiencing physical closeness and exposure in society (38-39). As Jerry W. Ward Jr. explains, this “alienation was one of the costs of telling the truth” during a period of time when silence and submission was the accepted response to prejudice and racial abuse (179). Wright’s psychological isolation from his family, the church, the Communist Party, and the black community keep him from engaging in society, and this sense of isolation resonates with the era in which he writes.

The black freedom struggle of the 1930s and the 1940s was not the widespread and influential movement of the 1960s civil right era. With the exception of the communists, militant labor unions, and the support progressive government officials, mass organization by blacks for the achievement of civil rights and liberties did not exist, especially in the South (Sitkoff 114). After the outbreak of World War II, the indictments against communist-threat organizations and leaders aided in stifling any progress in the black freedom struggle (114). The 1930s and 1940s era black freedom movement also employed different strategies than those of the 1950s and 1960s movement. Rather than protest and civil disobedience, the civil rights movement of the 1930s and 1940s “relied on publicity, agitation, litigation in the courts, and lobbying in the halls of political power to gain the full inclusion of blacks in American life” (17). As Sitkoff notes, these advances came in “the minor social, political, and cultural concessions afforded [to] Afro-Americans in the North, but the all-oppressive system of Jim Crow in the South remained virtually intact” (17). With the majority of movement activity occurring inside the courtroom, few blacks were able to engage in the struggle for civil rights. The

isolation of the movement from the people reflects the “solitude” of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. Wright’s feelings of disconnect from the African American race is symptomatic of the relatively low rate of participation of blacks in an organized freedom movement. The Jim Crow system’s constant threats played a major part in ensuring that few blacks participated in the movement and encouraged them to accept and adapt to the restraints and prejudice of the system. In 1942, A. Phillip Randolph’s call for a national mass march on city halls drew only silence. No blacks marched in response. When Randolph called for a week of nonviolent civil disobedience and noncooperation to protest Jim Crow school and transportation policies in 1943, a “poll indicated that more than seventy percent of African Americans opposed the campaign, and no blacks engaged in such activities” (100). The response of black churches and community leaders to the freedom struggle was “to stay on the sidelines” and “to advocate upright behavior and individual economic advancement within the existing order, and to preach paternalism and ‘civility’” (103). That Randolph’s call issued no response indicates that individuals like Randolph and Wright who were ready for movement were a minority of the black population. Randolph’s and subsequent leaders’ use of the “call-and-response pattern registers the changing relationship between the individual ... storyteller and the community,” which with Hall’s “long” approach helps contextualize the changing nature of the movement in regard to the individual and communal search and action (Callahan 17). Although the black community was not answering the call for action, individuals felt the need for change and movement. Fear of the Jim Crow system, however, prevented blacks from unifying in an organized movement and left individuals like Randolph and Wright frustrated with their environment. Isolation rather than organization was the

standard strategy for combating racial abuse, and this strategy prevented the black community from organizing en masse.

The isolation Wright felt in *Black Boy* represents a disconnect from his family, the church, the Communist Party, and the black community. This disconnect was largely due to the lack of kinship, “togetherness,” and “self-respect” he feels in these communities. As William L. Andrews explains, Wright does not “argue that being true to himself was for the good of others and indeed made community possible (the usual justification of the discourse of sincerity)” but rather “shows how truth to the self led to ruptures with every community [he] tried to join” (7). Rather than search for freedom within the “stifling” community group, Wright seeks an isolated, individualistic understanding of freedom—a freedom of the self. This conflict between the primacy of individual or collective liberation is a matter of debate among scholars. While scholars like Elsa Barkley Brown argue that the “advancement of the self, the liberation of the self, is a meaningless concept outside the context of one’s community,” Stephen Holmes posits that “individualism, not communitarianism, provides the best hope of disadvantaged minorities for achieving equality and inclusion” (Brown and Holmes qtd. in Dawson 255). Wright cannot achieve “liberation” within the “context of ... community” because the community appears unwilling to engage in a black freedom struggle. For this reason, Wright can only conceive of liberation as an individual activity. As a child growing up in the South, Wright voiced a desire to separate from his family: “I ached to be of an age to take care for myself” (Wright 98). His desire for autonomy reflects a need for selfhood and individualism within a system that considered blacks a collective unit. Whites’ dehumanizing treatment of blacks impacted the black psychology, causing Wright to consider himself a “non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt

that it was not” (194). The “impersonality” Wright expresses is representative of Cooke’s “self-veiling” stage, which suggests that Wright’s desire for individualism and autonomy is a futile effort as he is isolated from both himself and society. Although Wright’s “alert and thoughtful state” of being (Cooke 37) makes him keenly aware of himself, he recognizes his inability to access his true self: “my personality was numb, reduced to a lumpish, loose, dissolved state” (194). Wright could not experience a fullness of life within the Jim Crow system that demoralized and restricted the individual and collective growth of African American people.

The “stunted” life of the black community keeps Wright from seeking freedom in kinship and identification with the black community (197). Wright first recognizes a lack of selfhood and agency in students at the religious school: “The pupils were a docile lot, lacking in that keen sense of rivalry which made the boys and girls who went to public school a crowd in which a boy was tested and weighed, in which he caught a glimpse of what the world was” (104). To Wright, the only strategies of survival available in the Jim Crow world of the South are conformity or aggression. However, the black community of Wright’s time largely resembles the pupils—timid to act and devoid of a full experience of life. The silence and submission of the black community was problematic to Wright, yet he recognized the important function of invisibility for the black community. As Claudia C. Tate explains, “keeping silent had a special significance within the Black community; it indicated acceptance, submission to the conditions of life, especially those caused by racial practices” (118). By manipulating the black church into submission (through the church’s teachings), the Jim Crow system robs the community of its autonomy. Wright recognizes this manipulation of the black community by the Jim Crow system through his experience in the black church. The black church of Wright’s *Black*

Boy cannot help but to develop the autonomy of its members because it preaches subservience and acceptance of one's place in life. For this reason, Wright rejects the church in order to escape the psychological death of his individuality and self-determination. While many churches joined the Civil Rights movement, "another segment of the black church community remained virtually uninvolved in the black struggle" in order to maintain a relative peace for their congregations (Douglas and Hopson 95). The black churches' codes of religious behavior validated the Jim Crow system's idea of subservience and compliance as the only acceptable form of black conduct, and therefore, kept their members safe against racially-charged abuse. As Sitamon Mubarak Youssef explains, "the violence of living in a segregated racist society that saw young black men as a threat [tried to] force [Wright] to adopt behaviors that are unnatural and dehumanizing but would keep him alive ..." (91). Because of Wright's outspokenness and lack of faith, Granny considers him a "bad boy" and excludes him from the family in order to protect it from outside threats. Granny's compliance with the Jim Crow system isolates Wright from community and establishes his sense of "solitude" within society.

Wright's perspective of freedom is void of a sense of "collective deliverance" for blacks living in America (King 28). The idea of "collective deliverance" itself is an ambiguous concept, indeterminate of whether the deliverance implies being freed or self-liberated, "choseness" or self-initiated rebellion, going home or expelling an occupier from one's home, or whether it is of a religious or secular nature (28). Wright's *Black Boy* expresses an uncertainty and pessimism toward a "collective deliverance" of either being freed or self-liberated. Wright's experience with whites in the Communist Party result in his finding that although white communists were kind to blacks, they "idealized

all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw” (339). This idealization of blacks within the Communist Party was, in part, a way for Communists to fuel the ideology of the party—the poor, disenfranchised blacks as a symbol of the problematic capitalist system. As Wright noted, this collective view of the black population “oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead” (320). Figuring the black population as a collective whole perpetuated racial stereotypes and limited the autonomy of individuals. Wright’s observation is that the prospect of “being freed” by whites further stunts the growth and autonomy of blacks and restricts a true sense of black agency. Wright, however, considers a “collective deliverance” incited by black self-liberation an unlikely development in the freedom struggle. Wright’s summation of the black race reflects his doubt in an uprising or movement for freedom by African Americans:

how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure. (37)

Wright’s description of blacks as lacking “passion,” “hope,” “joy,” and “tradition” and overtaken by “confusions,” “flights,” “fears,” and “frenzy” does not suggest any hope in a strong, collective movement. The purpose of Wright’s criticism of the black community is not to “place blame on the black community itself” but to “show that a racist system produced the way of life that was forced on black people” (Hakutani 124). Wright suggests that in the process of adjusting to their (Jim Crow) environment, blacks “lose individuality, self-respect, and dignity” with the “circumstance in which they find

themselves [causing] damage to their personalities ...” (124). Wright’s evaluation of the “cultural barrenness of black life” leads him to understand the dehumanizing effect of conformity to the Jim Crow system: “I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man” (37). To Wright, the damaging effects of racism kept blacks from fully knowing themselves, which consequently prevented a satisfying and liberating form of community from forming. For this reason, the “kinship” Cooke identifies seems a foreign notion in Wright’s narrative. For Wright, freedom will not arise from a mass black movement because the black masses live “truncated” and limited” lives, unaware of the “meaning of their lives” and of the oppression they suffer (374, 267).

To avoid the snares of community, Wright consciously separates himself from others. Believing relationships will stifle individual attainment of freedom, he “develop[s] a self-sufficiency that ke[eps] [him] distant from others, emotionally and psychologically” (278). Wright expounds upon his isolationist tendencies in *Black Power*, stating that “I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness; it does not bother me; indeed, to me it seems the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it” (xxix). Because of his experiences with whites and the black community, Wright sees no other way to live but in isolation. From his experiences in the South, Wright develops an inability to trust others, both black and white. The Jim Crow system made blacks the target of white hatred and led blacks to become suspicious of each other’s motives. Whites often used the system not only to threaten blacks but to test their loyalty and adherence to Jim Crow laws. This “testing” regularly pitted blacks against each other in order to affirm their compliance with white supremacy’s dictates (rather than with any concept of racial solidarity). Trying to initiate a fight, Wright’s white

employers lie about threats from a black boy named Harrison in order to test his loyalty and to see a fight. Although Wright and Harrison recognize their employers' trickery, they decide to feign belief in the concocted threats in order to benefit monetarily from their fight. Wright relates that because of a "depend[ence] upon the whites for the bread we ate ... we actually trusted whites more than we did each other" (239). Earlier in the narrative, a young, black boy preys on Wright's desire for companionship, leading Wright to discover that the fight for survival causes a tension in the formation of relationships among blacks. Because of these experiences, Wright forgoes establishing trust and prevents others from misusing him by distancing himself from society. By using a "terse, cynical mode of speech," (278) Wright keeps from making alliances and isolates himself despite wanting "a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others, in which the basic emotions of life were shared, in which common memory formed a common past, in which collective hope reflected a national future" (279). Wright's self-imposed isolation is a defense mechanism that keeps him from anticipating a "national future" of "collective hope" and from feeling the disappointment of this unrealized dream.

Despite Wright's isolationist tendencies and negative perception of the black race, he expresses a desire for kinship and community within society (Howland 124). Wright "yearn[s] for identification" (8) and expresses a hunger for connection with his family:

Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this hunger of mine, this apartness, this eternal difference; and I did not suspect that I would never get intimately into their lives, that I was doomed to live with them but not of them, that I had my own strange and separate road, a road which in later years would make them wonder how I had come to tread it. (126)

Wright's inability to overcome his sense of "apartness" despite his desire for connection also reflects the disjointedness of the movement at the time. Wright's desire for "togetherness" might imply hope for a self-liberating form of "collective deliverance," yet the necessity of his "own strange and separate road" suggests a realization that the mass freedom struggle was not reality in his time. Living the "life of an optimist," Wright repeatedly allows community to "seduce" him during periods of "starv[ation] for association," yet finds his "optimism" falters when realism overtakes his perception of this "kinship." After leaving the South, Wright's hope for a sense of belonging peaks. He initially believes the Communist Party will provide community and the opportunity for black liberation:

...there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist In no other system yet devised could man so clearly reveal his destiny on earth, a destiny to rise and grapple with the world in which he lives, to wring from it the satisfaction he feels he must have. (372)

Although the Communist Party initially appears to be an agency of liberation to Wright, he discovers he cannot experience "kinship" within the party because membership requires a degree of suspicion. Protecting the party from "Trotskyite," outsider threat required members to regard each other with suspicion and to question loyalty to the party (351). Regardless of the Communist Party's ability to "make men feel the earth and the people upon it," Wright notes his feelings of isolation within the party: "at no time had I felt at home in the Communist party. I had always felt that the possibility was there, but always I was not quite sure of the motives of the people with whom I worked and they never quite seemed sure of mine" (363). Despite his persistent search for solidarity,

Wright never realizes this “possibility” of feeling at home and loses sight of a present movement for freedom. Nevertheless, *Black Boy* ends with hope for a response to his narrative and a promise to propel a collective movement through his words: “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (384). Wright hopes that the “inexpressibly human” desire for freedom, humanity, and agency will eventually lead to the demand for the “inalienable rights” of America’s promise.

Wright’s flight North further reflects his individual search for freedom. Although the Great Migration was a mass black movement, it was not an organized cry for freedom but an unorganized migration of individuals looking not for reform but for escape. The Great Migration, however, was a “glimmer of hope,” and although “few found the promised land, ... most experienced some relief from the tenantry, poverty, and ignorance of the Black Belt” (Sitkoff 217). In *Turning South Again*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. identifies the importance of mobility to the progression of black modernity. Baker defines “black modernism” as “the achievement of a life-enhancing and empowering public sphere mobility and the economic solvency of the black majority” (83, 33). Although the Great Migration centers on mobility, the North did not offer the “life-enhancing and empowering public sphere mobility” that Wright and others imagined was available in the North. Wright’s first aspirations for reaching the North spark during his childhood, beginning with frustrated talks among childhood friends. Wright interprets the boys’ words of hopelessness for the South and justification of flight North:

“Man, you reckon these white folks ever gonna change?” *Timid, questioning hope.*

“Hell, no! They are just born that way.” *Rejecting hope for fear that it could never come true.*

“Shucks, man. I’m going north when I get grown.” *Rebelling against futile hope and embracing flight.*

“A colored man’s alright up north.” *Justifying flight.* (80)

The “futile hope” of southern progress and belief in northern freedom allow the boys to dream of a region devoid of prejudice and racial hatred. The need to “justify flight” stems from a reluctance to leave home and encounter a foreign environment. Leaving the kinship of home and family was a major hardship of the Great Migration, yet Wright’s isolationist perspective allows him to search for freedom on his own: “a flash of insight... revealed to me the true nature of my relations with my family, an insight which altered the entire course of my life. I was now definitely decided on leaving home I was poised for flight” (173). “Justifying flight” also reflects the fear of angry whites who might discover the boys’ intentions of fleeing the South. As Wright prepares his own journey North, he expresses this fear as he “kn[ows] that southern whites hated the idea of Negroes leaving to live in places where the racial atmosphere was different” (254-255). Because of these societal restraints and his lack of a substantial income, Wright only has “vague hopes of going north” during his childhood (161). Although flight is a “vague hope,” Wright continues to aspire toward the Northern world of his imaginings: “The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me” (168). For Wright, the North becomes symbolic of hope and allows

him to imagine a future of opportunity (Karem 85). Place, rather than a change or uprising (of white or black people), became synonymous with the attainment of freedom. Belief in Northern freedom suggests that racism is a southern problem; however, many blacks, like Wright, discovered that racism was a pervasive national problem.

Although Wright suggests that “there was no racial fear” in Chicago, he encounters a more subtle form of racism in the North, particularly in the Communist Party (261). Using Wright solely for his “negro” status, the Communist Party in Wright’s narrative exploits blacks in order to strengthen its political agenda. Although white communists were kind to blacks, they, as Wright saw, “idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw” (339). This idealization of blacks within the Communist Party was, in part, a way for Communists to fuel the ideology of the party—the poor, disenfranchised blacks as a symbol of the problematic capitalist system. While the desire for community acceptance follows Wright northward, he discovers in the Communist Party and the Northern environment “the alienated character of modern urban life”—an alienation that resembles his experience in the south (Karem 80). Furthermore, Wright observes that the North has a debilitating effect on poor blacks: “what moved me most of all was the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll that the urban environment exacted of the black peasant” (284). Although Wright gives no explanation of the relationship between the Northern environment and mental illness in poor blacks, he may be referring to the poor living conditions of blacks in industrialized cities—a situation he addresses in *Native Son*. Once a source of hope for Wright, the North eventually becomes a place of fear that differs little from the South. Voicing this discovery, Wright expresses his disillusionment: “It was inconceivable to me, though bred in the lap of southern hate, that a man could not have his say. I had spent a third of

my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear, And now I was facing fear again [...]” (344). Wright realizes that the North cannot fulfill his desire for agency and discovers that the attainment of freedom requires more than distance from the South. Much like Shorty, who recognizes that he will never physically leave the South, Wright later grasps the psychological impossibility of leaving the past behind. Shorty’s words foreshadow Wright’s realization: “I’ll never leave this goddamn South I’m always saying I am but I won’t [...]” (257).

The South follows Wright and restricts his freedom and sense of agency regardless of his location. As Wright explains in “The Handiest Truth,” the “environment that the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings” (3). Although technically limited to the South, the Jim Crow system pervades American culture by limiting “the aspirations of black people” with both law and prejudice preventing black mobility (169). The minimal distinctions between Southern de jure segregation of law and Northern de facto segregation of custom “implicat[es] the nation” for prejudice and racial hatred held against blacks (Lassiter and Crespino 7). Wright exposes the “myth of Southern exceptionalism” and broadens the territory of civil rights trouble by identifying Northern methods of marginalizing and separating blacks from the dominant white culture (Lassiter and Crespino 7). Society’s restraints on black advancement conflict with Wright’s desires as he “yearn[s] for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed” (169). The Jim Crow system used fear to police blacks in the South; therefore, blacks depended on their adherence to these rules and the development of a hypersensitive awareness of whites for survival. Accused of “acting white,” Wright receives the advice that he should “learn how to live in the South”

in order to avoid racial abuse (184, 183). Wright's punishable acts of freedom are opposite of the submissive and servile manner blacks were to assume before whites. To protect himself from racial abuse, Wright must become "conscious of the entirety of my relations with [whites]"—a consciousness that limits his ability to act freely (196). Despite his conscious awareness of whites, Wright is unable to fully submit himself to the Jim Crow system and accept losing his autonomy: "I had begun coping with the white world too late. I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior" (196). In *Shorty*, Wright sees a life of subservience and humiliation that he is unwilling to lead and concludes that "if I did not want others to violate my life, how could I [like Shorty] voluntarily violate it myself?" (253). Wright determines to retain his sense of self-respect regardless of the harm he may incur.

Ultimately, Wright perceives only two options for blacks living in the South (and the nation)—organized opposition to the Jim Crow system or acceptance of "the life of a genial slave" (252). These options are hopeless to Wright who can neither live the life of a slave nor believe in the success of an organized freedom struggle. Considering the "fight" option, Wright surmises that he "could never win that way; there were many whites and there were but few blacks. They were strong and we were weak. Outright black rebellion could never win. If I fought openly I would die and I did not want to die" (252). This tension between militancy and nonviolence reflects Wright's frustration with both the black community's unwillingness to act and the unlikelihood that any action could effect change. His disaffection from whites allows Wright to form a militant discourse of action, yet he concludes that nonviolence is the only viable option for his time. Because he lacks faith in a black freedom struggle, Wright's perception of black life

in America appears bleak and hopeless. Although Wright believes “fight” is not a readily available option, he suggests that black revolution will overcome the Jim Crow fear:

I would make it known that the real danger does not stem from those who seek to grab their share of wealth through force, or from those who try to defend their property through violence, for both of these groups, by their affirmative acts, support the values of the system in which they live. The millions that I would fear are those who do not dream of the prizes that the nation holds forth, for it is in them, though they may not know it, that a revolution has taken place and is biding its time to translate itself into a new and strange way of life. (302)

Despite Jim Crow’s reign over black life during his era, Wright has faith in the future of a black collective struggle against the fear and prejudice that limit black agency and restrict black equality in American politics and society.

The concept of “fighting” in Wright’s *Black Boy* is a recurrent theme in the narrative. Early in his life, Wright begins to question his suffering and discovers an affinity for tales of revolution: “It [the questioning] made me love burrowing into psychology, into realistic fiction and art, into those whirlpools of politics that had the power to claim the whole of men’s souls. It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion” (101). The story of a black woman avenging her husband’s death leads Wright to “resolve that I would emulate the black woman if I were ever faced with a white mob; I would conceal a weapon ... [and] I would let go with my gun and kill as many of them as possible before they killed me” (73-74). Feeling that the woman’s story provides him a course of action, Wright explains that “the story of the woman’s deception gave form and meaning to confused defensive feelings that had long been

sleeping in me” (74, Ramsby 653). Wright’s “defensive feelings” reflect a mindset of self-defense rather than militancy. Here, Wright identifies “fighting” as a means of protection and retaliation rather than a militant fight for freedom. Growing up in the racially tense environment of the South, Wright realizes early in his life that fighting is necessary for survival in the South: “I knew that my life was revolving about a world that I had to encounter and fight when I grew up. Suddenly the future loomed tangibly for me, as tangible as a future can hold for a black boy in Mississippi” (125). To Wright, the future held not a struggle for freedom but a struggle for survival, with freedom only a secondary notion to survival.

After moving northward, Wright’s perception of “fighting” changes from a necessity for survival to a type of militant organizing. Wright expresses his “dream of organizing secret groups of blacks to fight all whites” and decides that “if the blacks would not agree to organize, then they would have to be fought” (266). Wright’s frustration at the absence of a collective black freedom struggle causes him to postulate a form of militancy that fought against all who opposed and did not work for a collective black movement. Speaking out of anger, Wright’s true commitment to “fight[ing] all whites” and “blacks [who] would not agree to organize” is questionable. While working at a post office in Chicago, Wright comes to “ridicule all ideas of protest, of organized rebellion or revolution” because he recognizes the unlikelihood of revolution among the masses (285, 296). In response to speculations of a mass uprising, Wright expresses his pessimism:

The speakers claimed that Negroes were angry, that they were about to rise and join their fellow white workers to make a revolution. I was in and out of many Negro homes each day and I knew that Negroes were lost,

ignorant, sick in mind and body. I saw that a vast distance separated the agitators from the masses (294).

Wright understands that the fighting of a few agitators will result in little change; therefore, militancy is not an option because the masses were not willing to fight. Exploring the reasons for this unwillingness to fight, Wright determines that a lack of agency and self-determination keeps blacks immobile: “These people, of course, were not ready for a revolution; they had not abandoned their past lives by choice, but because they simply could not live the old way any longer” (301). According to Wright, necessity rather than choice influenced the actions of many blacks, and the development of agency is essential to the choice of engaging in a fight for freedom. In the Communist Party, Wright eventually finds a group poised for action and deems it a “realm of revolutionary expression ... where Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role,” yet later Wright discovers the barbarism of revolutionary militancy in the Communist Party (318). The party “tests” members’ loyalty by their willingness to face police brutality during party demonstrations (334). Wright’s later expulsion from the Communist Party ends his involvement in a mass organized movement; however, he retains his belief that fighting is necessary to the freedom struggle:

Somehow man had been sundered from man and, in his search for a new identity, for a new wholeness, for oneness again, he would have to blunder into a million walls to find merely he could not go in certain directions. No one could tell him. He would have to learn by marching down history’s bloody road. He would have to purchase his wisdom of life with sacred death. He would have to pay dearly to learn just a little. (382)

Agency—“a new identity [...] a new wholeness, [...] oneness”—requires a bloody fight for the wisdom and knowledge of freedom. To Wright, the fight will not perpetuate the “sunder[ing]” of man from man but will heighten the visibility of blacks as members of humankind. Wright suggests that the “inalienable rights” of man first rely on the recognition of a person or group’s humanity. For this reason, the attainment of equal rights as citizens remains a struggle for blacks rather than an inherent right, with the “native son” an outsider to the ideals of his country (302).

From Wright’s perspective, a black freedom struggle, whether individual or collective, will not have the force to change a racially tense America nor will it establish political, societal, and psychological freedom for blacks. Freedom, according to Wright, requires a change to white America:

I feel that for white America to understand the significance of the problem of the Negro will take a bigger and tougher America than any we have yet known. I feel that America’s past is too shallow, her national character too superficially optimistic, her very morality too suffused with color hate for her to accomplish so vast and complex a task. (272)

The American system of “morality” operates according to principles that exclude blacks from basic human and political rights, and the American economic system especially depends on the exploitation of black labor. Wright’s perception of America reflects the “disillusioned liberalism” of black leaders (like the post-1930 Du Bois) who saw the “capitalist system ... as a fundamental part of the problem” and considered whites “too wedded to the material gains derived from a racist system or too indifferent to make reliable allies” in the struggle for black freedom (Dawson 17-18). Because American whites depended on their racial superiority for economic advancement, few were willing

to aid a movement for black civil rights. America's "superficial optimism" for solving the "problem of the Negro" is, at this time, a superficial attempt at including blacks in American citizenship. According to Wright, the "psychological distance" of the races is a cause of the "Negro problem": "How far apart in culture we stood! All my life I had done nothing but feel and cultivate my feelings; all their lives they had done nothing but strive for petty goals, the trivial material prizes of American life. We shared a common tongue, but my language was a different language than theirs" (272). To Wright, white America's inability to understand and sympathize with blacks hinders the progress of a black freedom struggle. As Jerry W. Ward Jr. explains, *Black Boy* answered this essential problem and question found also in *Native Son*: "given the racial mores of America or the racial contract that governed life in the United States, would it ever be possible for black men and white men who were linked by a common history to achieve a common humanity?" (177). Ward believes Wright's "answer depended on whether the language and concepts used by whites and blacks came to have identical referents" (177). Wright's recognition of a "psychological distance" between the races, however, reflects his doubts concerning the achievement of a "common humanity" and shared citizenship in America. According to Wright, citizenship without full inclusion in American life and politics was a cultural paradox because "though he [the Negro] is an organic part of the nation, he is excluded by the entire tide and direction of American culture" (272). Wright explains that the "Negro problem" is not simply an effect of white hatred but a result of America's inability to confront issues:

the anti-Negro attitude of whites represents but a tiny part—though a symbolically significant one—of the moral attitude of the nation . . . our America is frightened of fact, of history, of processes, of necessity. It hugs

the easy way of damning those whom it cannot understand, of excluding those who look different, and it salves its conscience with a self-draped cloak of righteousness I really do not think that America, adolescent and cocksure, a stranger to suffering and travail, an enemy of passion and sacrifice, is not ready to probe into its most fundamental beliefs. (272-273)

America's democratic "righteousness" and empty rhetoric of "equality for all" resolves nothing for a problem that requires moral and political action and a deep awareness of black struggle. America's tendency to fear and therefore ignore "fact" and "history" keeps the "Negro problem" distant from the national mind. According to Wright, America "is not ready to probe into [the] fundamental beliefs" that would reveal its "color hatred" and noncompliance to the democratic, American ideals it claims to uphold.

Both the allowance and avoidance of black struggle and racial discrimination result in a "sprawling land of unconscious suffering" for black Americans (267). American "color hate" and discrimination lead Wright to feel that "the Negro could not live a full human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America" (297). "Liv[ing] a full human life" requires autonomy and the opportunity for self-determination, yet racism barred blacks from these experiences. Because of America's unwillingness to address the "Negro problem," Wright suggests that blacks must both resolve the "Negro problem" and the American problem:

It seemed to me, then, that if the Negro solved his problem, he would be solving infinitely more than his problem alone. I felt certain that the Negro could never solve his problem until the deeper problem of American civilization had been faced and solved. And because the Negro was the most cast-out of all the outcast people in America, I felt that no other

group in America could tackle this problem of what our American lives meant so well as the Negro could. (297-298)

Although Wright believes blacks could best “tackle” the Negro and American problem, his optimism wanes when he considers the black collective’s fear of and reluctance toward action. Wright catches “glimpse[s] of the potential strength of the American Negro” from the Garveyite organizations; however, their Black Nationalist beliefs further separate the races and avoid the “American problem” by rejecting America for Africa (287). Wright’s confinement to the “dark underworld of American life” allows him to question whether black self-determination and “life” is a possibility for blacks living in America: “Could a Negro ever live halfway like a human being in this goddamn country?” (349). American life provides little hope to Wright because the country “had shown [him] no examples of how to live a human life” (383). For Wright, American citizenship needs to represent more than participatory freedom—citizenship, voting, and holding office (King 27). By closely linking American citizenship with personhood, Wright suggests that citizenship should include the freedom of autonomy: self-determination, pride, self-respect, and freedom from the old sense of self and relationships of oppression (King 27). Wright uses these “negative” (freedom to) and “positive” (freedom from) concepts of freedom to define the liberties afforded to whites and his expectations for American equality. Wright eventually becomes an expatriate of the United States—an action that signifies his doubt in America’s ability to change and rid itself of color hatred (Lowe 567).

In Wright’s *Black Boy*, freedom represents a hunger for a life unencumbered by the racial hatred, prejudice, and restrictions of the Jim Crow system and America. Wright hungers for a sense of agency, self-determination, and self-respect and for the political

and societal equality of American citizenship. Wright's hunger results in his dissatisfaction with his environment and the people who inhabit it, and a doubt for substantial change to the racially-tense atmosphere that defines his life. This hunger for freedom manifests itself in religion and political action, yet these outlets do little to effect any change in Wright's world. Wright recognizes a shared desire for life in blacks, like his grandmother, who sought freedom in religion: "I knew more than she thought I knew about the meaning of religion, the hunger of the human heart for that which is not and can never be, the thirst of the human spirit to conquer and transcend the implacable limitations of human life" (119). Wright, however, finds the search for freedom through religion a futile effort and discovers the desire to "transcend the ... limitations of human life" does not often result in a concerted effort or action to fulfill the need for autonomy and to realize life's potentialities. Unlike the "docile" and fearful black collective, Wright expresses a willingness to fight for justice by claiming that "if laying down my life could stop the suffering in the world, I'd do it" (116). The effectiveness of this action, however, Wright doubts: "But I don't believe anything can stop it [the suffering]" (116). Whether individual or collective, action proves unsuccessful for Wright. Although the Communist Party expresses a "readiness to act," the party is "lost in folly" over internal politics and forgoes its promises of action for African American equality (296). The hunger Wright desires to satiate is left starving by the environment in which he lives. As Jeff Karem suggests, the conclusion of Wright's *Black Boy* "is as much a beginning as an end, for even though there is a sense of possibility, there is no complete triumph, no elimination of Wright's hunger" (80). Like his grandfather who believes The Civil War will someday resume, Wright realizes that the "war had not really ended, that it would start again" (141). While critics like David L. Cohn "could not understand why Wright seemed to call

for a second Civil War to free the black masses,” Wright recognized that the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation had brought little change to the blacks living in America—another fight was necessary to secure black freedom (Ward 179). For Wright, this war is an individual effort, a psychological groping for agency and identity as an American citizen. The “warring” Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s has yet to begin—an era Wright cannot foresee during the politically immobile 1910s through 1940s. Nevertheless, Wright understands that the freedom struggle is a generational fight that “must be ‘fostered, won, struggled, and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another’” (Tate 119, *Black Boy* 37). Despite his inability to foresee a mass national movement for black equality, Wright stresses the importance of a “long,” generational struggle—a continual struggle, which I believe, he would extend beyond the end of the recognized Civil Rights Movement.

CHAPTER III

ERNEST GAINES'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN: A "LONG" ACCOUNT OF BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* spans a period of time that includes pre-emancipation slavery and the beginnings of the recognized Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Following the black freedom struggle from the 1860s to the 1960s, Gaines uses Miss Jane Pittman to redefine the movement as a century long process that will continue as it gains momentum at the end of the novel. As Critic Albert Wertheim likewise suggests, "*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* recalls an arduous, painful, slow 100 year journey in search of the freedom promised by Corporal Brown and white American society by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863" (221). Jane's "long" journey distinguishes this narrative from movement centered works of the time by focusing on the progression from slavery to the present day. Published in 1971, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* may be a reflection of Gaines's perspective on the Civil Rights Movement; however, the realistic tone of Miss Jane Pittman's voice expresses an experience that distinguishes her from the isolated and angry narrator of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. While the relatively optimistic tone of *Miss Jane Pittman* may be suggestive of Gaines's time, Jane's initial enslavement and her setting in rural Louisiana distinguish her experiences from Wright's, which primarily involve black life in city settings (Jackson, Memphis, and Chicago). The "self-veiling" and "solitude" of Wright's *Black Boy* is practically absent from Jane's narrative, which seems grounded in

what Cooke defines as the “kinship” stage. Cooke recognizes “kinship” as “seeing deprivation and pain ... but ... recognizing endurance and dignity”—a stage in which “personal goals and communal powers surge together to one goal” (40). In the “kinship” stage, the “confirmation and strength [of] the self” is in “unison with the kindred person(s)” as community becomes a means of self-knowledge. Despite the positive attributes of this stage, Cooke suggests that although “kinship” amounts to the “enrichment” of black characters and black community, it offers little relief from oppression and “carries with it an undertone of defense” (40). Although *Miss Jane Pittman* bypasses the “self-veiling” and “solitude” stages (stages suggestive of periods of time through which she lives), Cooke’s “kinship” stage generally reflects novels written between the 1940s and 1970s, corresponding to the novel’s date of publication and encompassing a period of time in which Miss Jane Pittman lives. The “kinship” of *Miss Jane Pittman* gives light to definitions of freedom that differ from those found in Wright’s *Black Boy* as she centers “freedom” in the collective experience of the community. Furthermore, *Miss Jane Pittman*’s century-long expanse embodies the “long civil rights movement” by capturing the beginnings of “freedom-talk” during emancipation (King 14).

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman begins just before the abolition of slavery and the beginning of Reconstruction. In Jane’s autobiography, the term “freedom” initially implies liberation from oppression and deliverance of the people by an outside force (King 28). The idea of “collective deliverance” in Jane’s autobiography begins as a “story of being freed” and ends as a tale of “self-liberation” (28). The Union soldier Miss Jane encounters announces that the Yankee soldiers “c[a]me down here to beat them Rebs and set y’all free”—a statement that gives her the strength to act defiantly

against her master's wife for the first time (8-9). The power of rebellion becomes a reality to Jane after being told of her deliverance from slavery, and she begins to weld her own rebellion against her enslavers. Exploring the impact of the Union army's presence on the slaves, Eric Foner suggests that "the occupying Union army reinforced the freedmen's assertiveness and inspired constant complaint on the part of the whites" (80). Despite her aggressiveness and newfound sense of agency, Jane continues to cling to the Union soldier, Mr. Brown, as the promise of her freedom. Jane initially associates freedom with Mr. Brown and his home in Ohio and believes she must reach Ohio to attain freedom. In Jane's "childlike mind," "freedom and its fulfillment are thus identified spatially, rather than psychologically and spiritually" (Andrews 146). Recognizing the futility of this association, Unc Isom mocks Jane's faith in Mr. Brown's promise and the false sense of freedom she gains from receiving a new name from the soldier: "Yankee told you your name was Jane; soon as Old Mistress start beating you, you can't find Yankee" (13). Unc Isom suggests that the soldier's declaration of freedom means little inside the institution of slavery and that her belief in this promise will reap nothing but abuse. Black life after emancipation was an "impossible dilemma" to former slaves like Jane: "if they openly declare their freedom and their rights, they are beaten like Tacey or gunned down like Big Laura; if they are silent and compliant, they are reduced to life only just short of slavery" (Wertheim 223-224). Ignoring Unc Isom's words, Jane begins her journey to Ohio but again faces resistance to her conceptualization of freedom. Jane encounters another Yankee soldier who explains that freedom is not limited to the North and suggests that she find a place of her own: "'you don't have to go to Ohio now,' he said. 'And your friend Brown might not even be there. I'll find you a place to stay till you find yourself a home'" (34). The Yankee soldier's advice to Jane—"find yourself a home"—suggests a

kind of self-determination Jane has yet to develop. Unable to truly define “freedom,” Jane and the other former slaves must establish “what freedom is” in order to begin their pursuit of it.

The first symbolic act of “freedom” that Jane experiences is the changing of her name from “Ticey” to “Miss Jane Brown.” The change from “Ticey” to “Miss Jane Brown” represents a shift away from slavery and the beginning of freedom and respectability for blacks. As the Union soldier explains, “Ticey is a slave name”—a name given by the slaveholders which lacks any connection to family lineage and history (8). Renaming Ticey, “Miss Jane Brown,” the soldier gives her a formal name and the address, “Miss,” as a sign of the respectability she gains as a freed slave. The last name “Brown” ties Jane to the Union soldier, which signifies a history of black and white togetherness in the struggle for equality. The soldier’s act of renaming, however, denies Jane the agency of choosing a name for herself. His action echoes the slaveholders’ naming of slaves and suggests his belief that black freedom will be won simply by the Union army’s victory without any aid from the black community. Jane’s “naming” contrasts Frederick Douglass’s experience of taking a new name. Douglass allows “Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name” and accepts the name, “Douglass,” by “continu[ing] to use it as [his] own” (116). Douglass’s last words in *The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass*—“I subscribe myself, FREDERICK DOUGLASS”—indicates his ownership of the name. Although Mr. Johnson “chooses” the name, he does not “give” or “force” the name upon Douglass. Rather, Douglass approves and takes possession of his name and relative agency as a freedman. In the role of “liberator,” the soldier refuses to grant Jane and other slaves any agency in or ownership of their struggle for freedom. The changing of names became a significant act for blacks after emancipation, as Foner

relates: “the newly freed slaves sought to ‘throw off the badge of servitude,’ to overturn the real and symbolic authority whites had exercised over every aspect of their lives. Some took new names that reflected the lofty hope inspired by the emancipation” (79). Names like Alexander Hamilton, Franklin Pierce, Hope Mitchell, Chance Great, and Thomas Jefferson were suggestive of blacks’ newfound inclusion in American citizenship and hopes for change after emancipation (79). The popularity of name change also appears in Miss Jane’s narrative: “We must have been two dozens of us there, and now everybody started changing names like you change hats. Nobody was keeping the same name Old Master had given them” (18). Breaking free of their slave names, freed blacks began choosing the names of famous white and black politicians and leaders as their own. As Miss Jane relates, assuming the names of black leaders was significant to men like Ned:

He had changed his name now—Ned Douglass. Before he was Ned Brown—after me Then he changed it to Douglass, after Mr. Frederick Douglass. He was go’n to be a great leader like Mr. Douglass was. He was Ned Douglass awhile, Ned Stephen Douglass awhile, then Edward Stephen Douglass. All the rest of the young men round him was taking on names like that. Some Douglass, some Brown—after John Brown, not Jane Brown; some Turners, after Nat Turner; Sumners; some Sherman. Ask one his name, right off he would tell you John Brown. Ask him his daddy’s name, he told you Ed Washington.(76)

For these young men, the names of black leaders represent strength and the attainment of the respectability and renown that was ordinarily denied to blacks. Choosing these names signifies the young men’s aspirations for leadership positions in the black community. As

Jane suggests, the chosen names do not reflect the legacy of an immediate family but imply that the black community is part of a collective family. Adopting new names, however, did not improve blacks' physical conditions nor did it positively influence the attitudes of whites like Jane's mistress. The symbolic change did not alter reality of life after emancipation; therefore, blacks sought freedom in "the real" by moving away from the South.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, Jane and the other former slaves recognize their familiarity with the term "freedom" but do not understand what it means to "be free." As Jane explains, "We had never thought about nothing like that, because we had never thought we was go'n ever be free. Yes, we had heard about freedom, we had even talked about freedom, but we never thought we was go'n ever see that day" (16). As *Miss Jane Pittman* demonstrates, the concept of freedom became a source of debate after the abolition of slavery among former slaves and whites. Eric Foner explains that after emancipation, freed slaves soon realized that a "straightforward definition" of freedom did not exist as a "predetermined category or static concept;" therefore, "'freedom' itself became a terrain of conflict, its substance open to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations, its content changing for whites as well as blacks in the aftermath of the Civil War" (77). The plantation owner in *Miss Jane Pittman* defines black freedom by his release of responsibility for his former slaves: "You free and don't belong to me no more. Got to fight your own battles best you can" (12). As Jane comes to understand, "fight[ing] your own battles" means both struggling against white violence and fighting for freedom without the help of the Union army.

Amongst the former slaves, the debate becomes a matter of going North or staying on the plantation. While the elder slaves, like Unc Isom, suggest they "stay ...

[and] see if old Master go'n act different when its freedom," the younger slaves declare that "We leaving out if the old people want to stay here, stay. We free, let's move" (13-14). The mindset of "we free, let's move" was prevalent after emancipation as "it seemed that half the South's black population took to the roads" (Foner 80). As one Texas slave later recalled, "Right off colored folks started on the move. They seemed to want to get closer to freedom, so they'd know what it was—like a place or a city" (qtd. in Foner 80). As in Wright's *Black Boy*, the North becomes a symbol of freedom and to slaves who recognized freedom as coming from the northern Union army, the association between freedom and place becomes especially significant to the journey northward. After multiple people discourage Jane's journey northward, she eventually recognizes that her perilous tract may not result in the freedom she seeks: "All of a sudden it came to me how wrong I had been for not listening to people. Everybody, from Unc Isom to the hunter, had told me I was. I wouldn't listen to none of them. I felt like crying" (51). Rather than continuing her journey to Ohio and the North, Miss Jane decides to remain in Louisiana in order to provide for herself and Ned. Miss Jane's resolution to stay in the south reflects the decision of many freedmen after emancipation, as Foner relates: "a majority of freedmen did not abandon their home plantations in 1865, and those who did generally traveled only a few miles" (81). For some former slaves, staying in the South meant finding out if they were truly free from slavery—a trial that reflects Unc Isom's disbelief in a proclamation's ability to end the bondage of slavery. Jane, however, stays in Louisiana for the sake of survival and "live[s] [a] rural life out of necessity, not choice" (Karem 116). For Jane, the danger of the journey North outweighs the struggles of life on a sharecropping plantation. Despite the relative "slavery" of the sharecropping system, Jane can provide food and housing for Ned and herself by working on the

plantation. Regardless of these limited options, Jane's "husband," Joe Pittman, refuses to live the life of a sharecropper and actively pursues a sense of agency and freedom in self-governed work.

Joe Pittman defines freedom by the sense of autonomy, self-determination, pride, and self-respect he experiences in his employment. For Joe, "freedom is not merely movement away from the control of others but is in fact the exercise of his own power" (Byerman 118). Working on Colonel Dye's plantation keeps Joe in a state of economic enslavement, and he resolves to leave in order to escape the plantation mentality of the Colonel: "Joe was sharp with a horse and he was sure he could find a place where he could get more money and get better treatment than what he was getting here" (81). Although Joe is free to leave Dye's plantation, the Colonel uses an old debt to keep him in relative slavery until he pays it off through work. This "old debt," however, only surfaces when Joe tries to leave. Additionally, the Colonel adds thirty more dollars in interest after Joe pays off the one-hundred and fifty dollar sum. Employment at Colonel Dye's plantation is much like the sharecropping system, which exploited black workers by keeping them dependent on the owner for survival. By "breaking horses," Joe "do[esn't] take orders from a soul on earth"—a situation that gives him the autonomy and freedom he desires (93). According to Eric Foner, economic freedom was a major concern of blacks after emancipation: "freedom meant more than simply receiving wages. Freedmen wished to take control of the conditions under which they labored, to free themselves from subordination to white authority, and to carve out the greatest measure of economic autonomy economic emancipation meant freedom from white control" (103). Despite the danger of breaking horses, Joe relishes his title as "Chief" and accepts the possibility that his job might result in his death. To Joe, an autonomous death is better

than a subservient life. As the hoo-doo woman explains, Joe's attachment to breaking horses stems from his desire for recognition as a man: "He probably rides for many reasons. That's man's way. To prove something, Day in, day out he must prove himself" (97). She further explains that "man must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him" (99). For Joe and many black men, the need to prove oneself "a man" was felt due to the demeaning language of slavery that "infantilize[d] [black men] as 'boys'" to reinforce a sense of emasculation (Ling and Monteith 6). Although Joe feels "he must prove himself" a man, Jane recognizes him as a "real man" because of his acceptance of her barrenness and nonconformity to gender role stereotypes that call for a man to prove his masculinity by impregnating his wife (81). Despite Jane's praise of him and her pleas for him to discontinue his work breaking horses, Joe dies trying to maintain his sense of autonomy in a white dominated culture.

Although Jane discontinues her journey northward, she recognizes that "flight" is sometimes a necessary step toward understanding and defining freedom. When Ned voices a need to move North, Jane recognizes that he must leave both to gain a sense of selfhood and for safety reasons. Ned's fight against slavery contributes to the necessity of his flight—to stay means imminent death. His involvement in a Freedom Bureau committee makes his presence in the South problematic to white racists. His flight North, however, signifies not just escape from threat but a journey for freedom—a journey Jane determines is not essential to her but necessary for Ned's own self-discovery:

"I can't stop, Mama," he said.

"Then you have to go," I said.

[...] "What's up there?" I asked him.

"Everybody else going," he said.

“Many going, but not everybody,” I said. “I think you ought to go but not me” (78).

Jane’s perception of flight reveals that moving northward was a psychological necessity to some more than others. Like the old former slaves who resolve to stay on the plantation, Jane may see flight as necessary journey for young people searching for autonomy and freedom during the formative stage of their lives. As William L. Andrews explains:

Jane’s agreement shows that she understands the essential psychological nature of [Ned’s] quest; she sees that he needs to break the ties of home, to become his own man, to leave the South rather than “go back” to a slave status or voluntarily stop black progress westward. But she also understands that such movement would not be progressive for her. (147)

Jane, herself, experiences an adolescent search for northward freedom and recognizes the importance of this journey for Ned’s own self development. After attending school and teaching in Kansas and then fighting in the army, Ned returns “home” to the South a self-reliant man—a man who desires to spread this same sense of autonomy to his community through education. Regardless of Wright’s perception of flight as an individual escape, Ned’s flight becomes a political act that informs his leadership of the community. For Ned, the journey North and return home represents the “life-enhancing and empowering public sphere mobility” that Houston A. Baker Jr. recognizes as essential to the development of black modernity (33). Ned’s flight North strengthens his desire for political action, which calls for the “public sphere mobility” necessary for a movement—a marker of progression for the development of black modernity (33).

When Ned returns to Louisiana, he arrives with the intention of starting a school that engages in the debate over black equality. Assuming the church has taught Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass, Ned finds that the black community has little knowledge of the two black spokesmen. He explains to Jane that “Mr. Booker T. Washington taught that all colored ought to stay together, work together, and try to improve their own lot before they tried to mix with white folks. Mr. Frederick Douglass taught that everybody ought to work together. [He] always believed in Mr. Douglass’s teaching ...” (105). The goal of Ned’s school is to incite the “seemingly unquenchable thirst for education” many blacks felt after emancipation (Foner 96). According to Foner, “blacks’ hunger for education arose from the same desire for autonomy and self-improvement that inspired so many activities in the aftermath of emancipation” (97). Inciting a hunger for education in the Louisiana community, however, becomes a challenge for Ned who faces the same collective reluctance and fear Wright recognizes in the black community of his time. Ned, however, offers an optimistic rather than frustrated view of this reluctance by holding hope for an eventual dissolution of their fear and willingness to fight. Jane observes that despite his teaching, “the people wasn’t listening. Not [because] they didn’t believe in what he was talking about, but they had already seen too much killing. And they knowed what he was preaching was go’n get him killed, and them too if they followed” (106). Despite the “kinship” and unity of the community in *Miss Jane Pittman*, fear of racial abuse in the Jim Crow South initially stifles their communal power. The community, however, overcomes some of its hesitancy toward education by maintaining the school Ned establishes even after his death. Purchasing the land and the school, the community takes ownership of Ned’s teachings and asserts its independence from the white society’s restrictions against black land ownership (118-

119). Although the community continues to fear abuse, its ownership of the school is a small act of defiance that signals a stronger, future movement.

In his role as an educator and pastor, Ned preaches the politics of “fighting” against the oppressor and the submissive mindset of slavery in order to gain freedom. Like Richard Wright, Ned recognizes that fear of racial abuse keeps blacks compliant with the Jim Crow laws that prevent them from achieving freedom and agency, yet he attributes blame for slavery to both blacks and whites:

I won't blame all white men. I'll blame ignorance. Because it was ignorance that put us here in the first place. Because the white man didn't have to go to Africa with guns to get us. The white man came with rum and beads. And why? Because we was already waiting for him when he came there in his ships. Our own black people had put us up in pens like hogs, waiting to sell us into slavery. He didn't tell the white man how to treat us after he got us on his ship, the white man made up them rules himself. (113-144)

Ned tells a different story of the slave trade—a story in which blacks allow whites to strip them of their agency and humanity. By “sell[ing] [ourselves] into slavery” and by “not tell[ing] the white man how to treat us,” Ned suggests that blacks allow whites to manipulate them through both fear and financial incentive. Instead of complacency, Ned urges his audience to fight actively against their own fear and the fear of white racial abuse. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of community and kinship in the fight against oppression: “The white man never would have brought us here if we was together. He never would have separated a nation. But little tribes beat each other, and all the white man had to do was wait” (114). According to Ned, oppression continues

because the black race does not utilize its collective strength and fights against itself rather than acting as a whole. Unlike Wright, Ned does not perceive the white race as a collective unit of oppression but recognizes whites as individuals who either aid or terrorize blacks: “You got some black men ... that’ll tell you the white man is the worst thing on earth. Nothing horrible he wouldn’t do. But let me tell you this ... if it wasn’t for some white men, none of us would be alive here today. I myself probably’ll be killed by a white man. I know they following me everywhere I go” (113). Without a clear target for blame, Ned’s concept of “fighting” is an abstract idea rather than a physical act. The abstract idea of “fighting” signifies the type of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience the community’s leader, Jimmy, later advocates. Like Ned, Jimmy urges “fighting” and places this action within the context of Martin Luther King Jr.’s teachings: “But we have to fight. We have to fight. I’m not the only one doing this. They doing it everywhere They listened to [what] Martin Luther was teaching in Alabama” (238). Murdered before the start of the recognized Civil Rights Movement, Ned’s character underscores that fighting may mean death.

Despite understanding death as a consequence of action, Ned prefers death to safety and thereby slavery. In response to a young boy’s fear of death and desire for safety, Ned asks, “But if you must die, let me ask you this: wouldn’t you rather die saying I’m a man than to say I’m a contented slave” (117). Like Joe Pittman, Ned perceives agency as essential to the manhood often denied to blacks. Although his language seems patriarchal, Ned implies that agency is a requirement for selfhood—male and female. Even though Ned associates fighting with manhood, he seems to define “man” as “humanity” in the case of his children (two females and one male): “I want my children to be men I want my children to fight. Fight for all—not just a corner” (115).

Ultimately, Ned understands the purpose of fighting as a demonstration of black agency and self-determination that eliminates the expectation for submissive behavior from blacks: “Show them, warriors, the difference between black men and niggers” (117). To Ned, fighting allows blacks to break free of the demeaning “nigger” stereotype that eliminates their humanity in the eyes of white racists. Like Wright, Ned posits that fighting will bring recognition to the humanity of blacks and will hinder whites from objectifying blacks as tools used for the achievement of white prosperity. Compliance, however, figures blacks as instrument in their own oppression—a possibility Ned perceives in the teachings of Booker T. Washington.

Politically, Ned follows Frederick Douglass’s rather than Booker T. Washington’s plan for the advancement of the black race. Finding safety in Washington’s teachings, a young boy questions Ned’s perception of Washington:

You keep saying we ought to not listen to Mr. Washington, but ain’t Mr. Washington saying that to keep the race from getting slaughtered? Mr. Washington growed up round these white people. He know a man’ll shoot a black man down just for standing on two feet. This something maybe the people in the North don’t know yet. And another thing, Professor Douglass, ... ain’t he saying learn a trade because a trade is the thing that’s go’n to carry this country? (116)

The debate between Washington and Douglass is a matter of compliance to white society’s expectations for blacks. Gaines’s decision to stage the debate between Washington and Douglass, rather than the more commonly referenced debate between Washington and DuBois, reflects his (and Ned’s) hope for and belief in the possibility for black inclusion in American culture and politics. DuBois “saw little hope in a black-white

alliance,” and his conception of the black double consciousness emphasized a split between black and American (King 35). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois expresses that “one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro” and “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (5). Ned, however, considers the black American a complete entity that fights and struggles for recognition and rights. To Ned, the term “American” implies struggle, and he thereby connects the struggle of blacks seeking full citizenship rights to his notion of the word “American.” Furthermore, Ned recognizes the helpfulness of some whites in achieving freedom, unlike DuBois who believes an alliance between the races is impossible.

Rather than recalling the Washington and DuBois debate, Gaines uses Washington and Douglass to highlight the importance of black agency and self-determination rather than the safety found in compliance to white society. Washington’s arguments are appealing to the narrative’s black community that “from the announcement of emancipation to the civil rights movement, seeks first and foremost to maintain whatever economic security can be had under such a system” (Byerman 111). Although learning a trade would provide some economic gain for blacks, working a “trade” still equates with servitude and implies that blacks will never have either the mental capacity or equal opportunity to be successful in higher education. Despite the positives of trade labor, Ned sees more possibilities for blacks than Washington:

I agree with Mr. Washington on trade . . . , but trade is not all. I want to see some of my children become lawyers. I want to see some of my children become ministers of the Bible; some write books; some to represent their

people on the law. So trade is not all. Working with your hands while the white man write all the rules and laws will not better your lot. (116)

Although Washington believes that the black community must isolate itself and improve its “lot” before integrating with white society, Ned understands that this plan has not and will not establish equality for blacks: “Mr. Washington might have had the safety of our race in mind—I think Mr. Washington did—but 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” (117). Adhering to Washington’s plan of survival brought little change to the racially-tense environment, and violence continued although blacks following Washington’s teachings sought to separate themselves from white society. Furthermore, the “safety” of Washington’s plan meant complying with white society’s segregationist policies and warding against the “fighting” Ned believes is essential to gaining self-respect and recognition in American culture.

Contrary to Washington’s limited options for the black community, Historian Richard H. King considers Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass* a “canonical black American account of self-transformation and self-respect [that] anticipates the problem of the free, self-respecting self as it emerged in the civil rights movement” (74). Douglass’s charge for blacks to be “one’s own master” implies empowerment and self-determination rather than acceptance of white society’s limitations (15). Furthermore, Douglass highlighted “the connection between the willingness to fight for freedom” by urging blacks to “cast off the aura the dependency and creat[e] pride: ‘If we are elevated, our elevation will have been accomplished through our own instrumentality’” (32). Although Washington’s emphasis on economic stability answers the material concerns of blacks, he does not examine the consequences of

accepting white society's standards and the impact it will have on black self-formation.

Richard H. King explains that:

It was not that Washington denied the importance of self-respect; indeed, his whole effort was to give black people a sense of worth and importance. Rather it was that Washington saw such a state of mind as being achieved not through confrontation with but through the conciliation of the white world. It was not that Washington advocated passivity and quiescence; it was that action for him was limited almost exclusively to the economic sphere and implied an abdication of the political, at least in the present.

(86)

Despite Washington's concern for improving the conditions of the black community, his plan does not provide the hope and agency Ned desires for himself and the community. Rather than "abdicat[ing] ... the political," Ned emphasizes the importance for blacks of being recognized as American citizens.

In his sermon at the river, Ned defines the experience of being "American" as a relentless but satisfying struggle for freedom. Ned understands "freedom" as a process or a fight rather than an assumed set of rights and privileges—an understanding that reflects Douglass's assertion that the black community's "elevation will have been accomplished through our own instrumentality" (King 32). Because of pervasive white hatred, Ned determines that blacks will achieve freedom only through struggle and suggests that those who will not fight will remain subservient "nigger" slaves (115). In his sermon, Ned urges his congregation to "Be Americans" and distinguishes the difference between black Americans and "nigger" blacks:

Be Americans But first be men. Look inside yourself. Say, 'What am I? What else besides this black skin that the white man call nigger?' Do you know what a nigger is? First a nigger feels below anybody else on earth. He's been beaten so much by the white man, he don't care for himself, for nobody else, and for nothing else. He talks a lot, but his words don't mean nothing. He'll never be American, and he'll never be a citizen of any other nation. But there's a big difference between a nigger and a black American. A black American cares, and will always struggle. Every day he get up he hopes that this day will be better. The nigger know it won't. (115)

Ned's rhetoric of fighting for "manhood" or "humanity" resurfaces in the idea of the black "American." Although he emphasizes that blacks must first "be men," the terms "American" and "man" are almost synonymous according to Ned's understanding: "I'm much American as any man; I'm more American than most" (114). According to Ned's perspective, his hope and willingness to fight makes him a "man" and "more American than most," especially the "nigger" figure (114). To Ned, being an American implies hope; whereas, the "nigger" represents complacency and acceptance of inequality and discrimination. Ned's expectation for the black "American" is not the full rights of citizenship but a mindset of hope for the eventual attainment of these rights and liberties. From his experience with the Freedom Bureau, Ned understands that blacks cannot depend on the American government for freedom but must secure it for themselves. Observing the impact of the Freedom Bureau's retreat, Jane suggests that slavery can and did still exist after abolition: "It was slavery again, all right Mr. Frederick Douglass said give the South a chance. But when the people saw they was treated just as bad now

as before the war they said to heck with Mr. Frederick Douglass and started leaving” (72, 74). As Ned realizes after his move North, leaving means accepting racial hatred and retreating from it rather than fighting and challenging the ever-present problem of racism. Expressing his regret for leaving the South, Ned explains that “I left from here when I was a young man, but most people thought that was the best thing to do then. But I say to you now, don’t run and do fight. Fight white and black for all this place” (115). Like Douglass, Ned urges the community to stay and fight together for the South they call home. Ned realizes that “freedom” is not and should not be a northern-bound concept; rather, freedom must extend to all regions of America in order for the black community to experience the rights and liberties of American citizenship and democratic freedom.

Like Ned, Jane realizes that the struggle for freedom is a fight against a mentality held by both whites and blacks. Through her telling of the relationship between Tee Bob and Mary Agnes, Jane shows the negative effects of racism and prejudice on whites as well as blacks. As a wealthy, white plantation owner’s son, Tee Bob’s love for Mary Agnes, a Creole teacher, is illicit because of her “mixed” blood. Tee Bob’s friend, Jimmy Caya, tries to explain why he must not engage in a relationship with Mary Agnes: “Don’t you know who you are? Don’t you know what she is? Don’t you know these things yet? That woman is a nigger, Robert. A nigger. She just look white. But Africa is in her veins, and that make her nigger” (182). Because Tee Bob is a white, upper-class male, Caya implies that he must learn and adhere to cultural tenets that bar interracial relationships. According to Caya, this cultural restriction, however, does not prevent white men from raping or having sex with black women: “he told Tee Bob what everybody had always told him. From his daddy to his teacher had told him. ‘If you want her you go to that house and take her. If you want her at that school, make them children

go out in the yard and wait. Take her in that ditch if you can't wait to get her home. But she's there for that and nothing else'" (183). Defending his conversation with Tee Bob, Caya later explains that he "[old] [Tee Bob] no more than what my daddy told me What my daddy's daddy told him. What Mr. Paul told Mr. Robert. What Mr. Paul's daddy told him. What your daddy told you. No more than the rules we been living by ever since we been here" (201). Caya does not question "the rules" because tradition enforces and justifies the rules by their longevity.

Despite "learning" the rules of racial interaction from Caya, Tee Bob cannot accept his culture and the prejudice that forbids his love for Mary Agnes. After realizing that society forces black women, like Mary Agnes, to be willing recipients of rape, Tee Bob understands his awful power as a white man and commits suicide—he cannot allow society to violate his love for Mary Agnes. Trying to understand the suicide, Jane consults Tee Bob's parrain, Jules Raynard, who explains that society, black and white, is responsible for Tee Bob's death:

We all killed him. We tried to make him follow a set of rules our people gived us long ago. But these rules just ain't old enough Somewhere in the past Way, way back, men like Robert could love women like Mary Agnes. But somewhere along the way, somebody wrote a new set of rules condemning all that But Tee Bob couldn't obey. That's why we got rid of him. All us. Me, you, the girl—all us. (204)

Raynard explains that by accepting this "set of rules" both whites and blacks allow racism and prejudice to continue. As Jeff Karem explains, Gaines "represents the black and white communities as colluding in this suppression of freedom. Rather than perceiving them as 'culturally separate,' ... the novel shows the white and black

communities working together to uphold a set of limitations on individual assent” (110). As Tee Bob’s suicide demonstrates, this “set of limitations” victimizes blacks as well as whites who do not conform to its standards. Jane’s account of this story broadens the idea of the freedom struggle, making it a multiracial struggle against the racist society that hinders the freedom of black and whites relations. His story “demonstrate[s] the dangerous rigidity of community itself, revealing the struggles faced by those who break the rules of the majority” (Karem 110). Tee Bob stands alone in his struggle against a rigid and racist societal order and ultimately commits suicide, believing society will never change. Although Tee Bob’s resistance is a “forerunner of things to come,” the freedom struggle in Jane’s narrative continues to be a black movement for equality and civil rights rather than a fight of blacks and white working together (Wertheim 232). A collective movement, however, does not form until the end of Jane’s narrative when a black leader rises to lead the way.

The idea of freedom as “collective deliverance” encompasses a hope for a Moses-figure who will lead the people out of slavery and into freedom (King 28). In *Miss Jane Pittman*, the community searches for a leader, “The One,” who will lead them in the fight for civil rights. This emphasis on the individual “racial champion” of the community and the “capitalization of One suggests an explicitly holy power for the individual and a reverence for his or her capacity to champion the community” (Karem 110). The community’s reliance on a Messiah-figure for salvation is due to their fear and lack of determination. The people want to rely on a leader to fight for progress rather than to engage in the fight themselves. Jane explains that the hope for a leader is always present in oppressed groups:

People's always looking for somebody to come lead them. Go to the Old Testament; go to the New. They did it in slavery; after the war they did it; they did it in the hard times that people want call Reconstruction; they did it in the Depression—another hard times; and they doing it now. (211)

The wait and search for a leader keeps the people hoping, not in themselves but in an outside agent who will deliver them. Jane's community looks for "the One" with the birth of every child, and it ultimately chooses Jimmy as "the One" because of its need for a leader. Examining Jimmy's "chosenness," Jane explains the community's selection of Jimmy as their leader: "Why did we pick him? Well, why do you pick anybody? We picked him because we needed somebody. We could 'a' picked one of Strut Hawkins boys or one of Joe Simon's boys. We could 'a' picked one of Aunt Lou Bolin's boys—but we picked him" (212). The community's awareness of a movement in Alabama enforces their belief in and hope for a leader from their own group: "we said if Alabama could give "One" that good, Samson, Luzana could do the same. Oh, no, no, no, we didn't say it exactly like that. We felt it more. In here, in there. People never say things like that. They feel it in the heart" (212). Jane's community desires to start a movement in Louisiana; however, its fixation on a "leader lead movement" keeps them from action.

To confirm their belief in Jimmy's "Oneness," the community deliberately reads his actions as signs of his future leadership and forces him to conform to their standards for "the One": "by the time he was twelve he was definitely the One. We watched him every move he made. We made sure he made just the right ones. If he tried to go afoul—and he did at times—we told him what he had heard and what he had seen" (220). By "look[ing] at him hard," the community members try to remind Jimmy of the prophetic calling they believe he hears (220). When Jimmy gets in a fight with a group of boys, the

community “chatize[s] him no matter who was wrong. He wasn’t suppose to fight these in the quarters, he was suppose to stand up for them” (215). The community anticipates Jimmy’s “get[ing] religion” and desires for him to preach like other movement leaders but eventually relinquishes this requirement because of their already high expectations for him: “Just because we made him the One, don’t let’s try to make him a preacher too” (226). When Jimmy decides to leave for Washington a year before “that desegregating bill passed,” the people understand that “that was the reason ... we had made him the one” (227). Jimmy’s timing suggests to the people that he will have a significant influence in the civil rights movement. As with Ned, Jane explains that “if [Jimmy] was the One, he was go’n have to leave sooner or later,” and would return with an education and the ability to lead (215). However, when Jimmy returns, the community refuses to follow his leadership despite their former hopes in him.

When “all that Civil Rights trouble” starts, the community becomes fearful of the threats and abuse they see accompanying a movement (230). Jane explains that the fear kept the community “content” and unwilling to challenge the oppressive sharecropping system that defines their life in the quarters: “Everything was going on somewhere else. Alabama, Mi’sippi, New Orleans—but not Samson. The niggers here was contented” (231). The landowner’s threats of eviction keep the community from fighting in the movement by “demonstrating on [his] place” (233). He tries to dissuade the people from acting by convincing them of their freedom on his land: “I just want to remind every last one of y’all y’all living on this place for free. You pay me no rent, you pay me no water bill. You don’t give me a turnip out of your garden, you don’t give me one egg out of your hen house. You pick all the pecans you can find on the place and all I ask for is half, what I never get Anybody ‘round here think he needs more freedom than he already

got is free to pack up and leave now” (232-233). Robert Samson’s arguments against the need for a freedom movement and his threats initially hinder Jimmy’s influence when he returns to lead the community. Jimmy’s attempts to begin a movement in the black church by arguing that “Good Christians fight,” but the community answers that it does not understand the purpose of the “fight:” “You don’t come to our church no more, Jimmy. But now you come because you want us to help you. A cause we don’t even understand” (237). Labeling Jimmy an outsider to their community, people separate themselves from the Jimmy and the movement they initially sought through his leadership. His return is “not a triumph ... but ... a moment of estrangement” in the community as he is “isolate[d] ... [from] the communal space of the church” (Karem 110-111). Through Elder Banks, the narrative again relates the hesitancy and complacency of the elder generation to move or act against racial oppression: “I know how you feel, Jimmy I was young myself once and I know how the young feel. But we old now, Jimmy. This church is old All we want to do is live our life quietly as we can and die peaceably as the Lord will allow us. We would like to die in our homes, have our funerals in our church, be buried in that graveyard where all our people and loved ones are” (239). As Elder Banks explains, the community’s age and fear of racial violence motivate the people to remain silent and complacent. The community cannot foresee a successful movement starting in Samson, and the people eventually resign their hope for change: “What happened in Birmingham, what happened in Atlanta, can’t happen here. Maybe something else; maybe when all of us in here are gone” (239). The fragile “kinship” of the community breaks when it no longer centers its hope on a central figure.

When the community rallies against Jimmy, their exclusion of him shatters the collectivity and communal spirit that defines Cooke's "kinship" stage. The people do not want Jimmy's "deliverance" nor do they want to fight themselves. In an aside addressed to Jimmy, Jane explains how the collective psychology of the group functions to both rely on him and reject him as a leader:

It's not that they don't love you, Jimmy; it's not that they don't believe in you; but they don't know what you talking about. You talk of freedom, Jimmy. Freedom here is able to make a little living and have the white folks say you good Oh Jimmy, didn't they ask for you? And didn't He send you, and when they saw you, didn't they want you? They want you, Jimmy, but now you here they don't understand nothing you telling them. You see, Jimmy, they want you to cure the ache, but they want you to do it and don't give them pain. And the worse pain, Jimmy, you can inflict is what you doing now—that's trying to make them see they good as the other man. (250)

The people still want the freedom Jimmy signifies but they are content with the relative economic "freedom" and safety that complying with white society affords them. As Jane understands, "freedom and opportunity must be conceived in the folk mind and actualized there before it can be affected in the immediate social situation" (Andrews 149). Because the community cannot "conceive" of freedom outside its current state, it resolves to accept limited "freedom" and wait for a leader to "deliver" greater freedom. However, the community conceives a "leader" as a Messiah-figure that would bring salvation, not a leader they would follow in action. When Jane speaks to Jimmy about the

community's reluctance to follow him, she explains that the people must first realize that death is worse than fear before they will move:

Something got to get in the air first. Something got to start floating out there and they got to feel it. It got to seep all through their flesh, and all through their bones. But it's not out there yet. Nothing out there but white hate and nigger fear. And fear they feel is the only way to keep going. One day they must realize fear is worse than any death. When that time come they will be ready to move with you. (241)

Unbeknownst to Jane, the "something" that will incite a movement within the community is Jimmy's death. When Jimmy concocts a plan for protest at Bayonne's courthouse, the young people promise to follow him but "change their minds" as soon as Jimmy leaves (249). A few community members, including Miss Jane, assemble the morning of the protest to walk to Bayonne but their "walk" demonstrates fear rather than belief in their movement: "They was not marching, they was not hurrying; it didn't look like they was even talking to each other. They was walking like every last one of them was by himself and any little noise could turn him around" (257). Despite their fear, the people finally demonstrate their willingness to fight for themselves—an action Jane recognizes as significant: "Most of them was scared and they wasn't shame to show it. But they was standing there, and that's what mattered" (257). The mood of the group, however, changes from fear to outrage when news of Jimmy's death arrives. When Robert Samson approaches the crowd with the news, he intends to dissuade the movement and incite fear in the people, but Jane and "the braver ones" defy his words and push past him.

Despite Jimmy's "literal" death, Jane explains that he continues to live through the movement of the people: "Just a little piece of him is dead The rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne" (259). Jimmy's individual "fight" and subsequent death gain him reentrance into the community and through him, the community restores its sense of kinship and togetherness. Exploring the co-dependence of the individual and the community, Jeff Karem explains:

The community is only galvanized into action because Jimmy is willing literally, to "stand" on his own town in protest, in opposition to the wishes of his fellow African Americans. His sacrifice, in turn, only achieves its political potential once the community rallies and figuratively "meets" him in town to continue the protest. The triumphs of both Jimmy and the community are thus dialectically dependent upon one another. (111)

Jimmy's individual act becomes significant when the community eventually rallies in protest; however, the community only acts once Jimmy commits his significant act and dies. Through Jimmy's story, Gaines implies that an individual sense of self-determination is necessary before a community can move together with a collective sense of pride and self-respect for the community group (Karem 126). Jane's strength to defy Richard Samson is the result of the self-knowledge she gains through her "journeys," and with this knowledge, she becomes an effective organizer for the community at the end of the narrative.

Through Jane's "journeys" of religious conversion, she develops a sense of self-determination and strength in religious freedom. To gain salvation, Jane experiences a "journey" through the hardships in her life and struggle with her "load" (143). Jane describes the conversion experience as a challenge in which Jesus—"a White Man with

long yellow hair”—tells her that “to get rid of that load and be rid of it always, you must take it ‘cross yon river” (143). During her religious journey, Jane encounters the deceased Ned and Joe Pittman who offer to carry the load for her, she passes through a swamp of alligators and snakes, and she sees Albert Cluveau sitting on the horse that killed Joe Pittman, holding the gun he used to kill Ned (143-144). Despite the trials and the offers of help, Jane understands that she must carry the load herself “because the load I was carrying on my back was heavier than the weight of death” (144). Jane’s fear of death vanishes when she recognizes that carrying her “load” is a heavier struggle—a struggle she learns she can survive. Jane’s Jesus does not struggle through the river for her but forces her to develop the strength to handle trials and suffering. He awaits her arrival on the other side of the river, and then “raise[s] the load off [her] shoulder” (144). After completing her individual journey, Jane becomes a member of the church community. This order of events (individual struggle, then “kinship in community”) is similar to Jimmy’s journey in leadership, from individual effort to communal reinstatement as an icon of the movement. Jimmy encourages Jane to be part of the movement because she “can inspire others,” and her willingness to join is the result of her lack of fear for death—a fear she lost in her “journeys” (242). She voices her lack of fear to Mary, explaining that she “will die in Bayonne only if the Lord wills it ... if not, I’ll die in my bed. I hope” (249). The fear that hinders the community’s movement does not stifle Jane’s individual strength. By defying Robert Samson by word and action, Jane becomes a leader for her community to follow. Her age of one-hundred years suggests that the movement is not just for the young but for the whole black community. Jane recognizes that like the rivers she mentions earlier in her narrative, the black community will attain freedom one day. Although the levee holds the waters back, the “water will never die ...

[and] will run free again” (158). Jane understands that despite the restrictions and racial violence, the black community will rise and overcome the barriers that have held them back. As “Miss Jane’s religious travels take her across the river to the freedom of the soul,” “social freedom,” although yet to come, “is like the freedom of the river, inevitable” (Wertheim 230). Her assurance in a future freedom gives her the strength to endure and fight against the oppression that defines her life.

Gaines’s autobiographical concept for *Miss Jane Pittman* evokes the construction of selfhood through narrative. In “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography,” Nellie Y. McKay suggests that “black autobiographers used narrative to fight their battle against chattel slavery and to engage on the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people” (96). Although *Miss Jane Pittman* is fictional and not a true autobiography, Gaines as narrator suggests that “Miss Jane’s story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane’s” (viii). Gaines implies that Miss Jane is a voice for the black community; therefore, her autobiography establishes a collective self-identity for the black people. Although others “carr[y] the story for herwhen she was tired or when she just did not feel like talking any more, or when she has forgotten certain things,” Jane asserts her selfhood by declaring ““No, no, no, no, no”” when “she did not agree” and “the other person would not contradict her” (vii). Jane’s voice both establishes her identity and recognizes the struggle of blacks whose stories cannot be told audibly. *Miss Jane Pittman* as an autobiography emphasizes “individual worth, group pride, and the humanity of black people,” making it a universal story of the “long” black struggle and the promise of black self-determination (McKay 96).

CHAPTER IV

ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN: THE CONTINUED FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

Like Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Alice Walker's *Meridian* stresses the importance of self-knowledge and the individual (spiritual) attainment of freedom before participating in or leading a community effort for freedom. Set both during and after the recognized Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, *Meridian* focuses on the failure of mass organized movements and the continued need for grassroots centered movements. *Meridian* implies that the struggle for civil rights, equality, and freedom is a struggle that must continue past the end of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Walker challenges the conventional definition of the movement as a "halcyon decade" long by calling attention to the unfinished business left after the peak of the 1960s movement (Hall 1234). By employing the methods of grassroots movements, the people become agents in the struggle and therefore take ownership of their freedom. Read less as a post-Civil Rights narrative than as a "neo-segregation narrative," *Meridian* "seek[s] to expose systems of exclusion and disenfranchisement today [and to] upset dominant national narratives of achieved equality and Jim Crow's passing" (Norman 3). The "neo-segregation narrative," as Brian Norman identifies it, "take[s] on such contemporary concerns as the merits and limits of integration, self-segregation, multiculturalism, legislative reform, and the prospect of a truly postrace era..." (13). *Meridian*'s activism suggests that each community must work to affirm the national and

political progress made by the Civil Rights Movement; otherwise, de facto segregation and racism will continue to impact black lives. Because of *Meridian*'s emphasis on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and black life afterward, Michael Cooke labels the novel a prime example of the "intimacy" stage of African American literature:

Walker recapitulates the stages of self-veiling, solitude, and kinship within the matrix of intimacy. She helps us to see that self-veiling, which looks like a form of masochism rooted in the despair of color, extends indifferently out into the culture at large; in this regard, the achievement of intimacy entails not just a racial but a national breakthrough. (41)

As a character, *Meridian* represents more than the black struggle for freedom that is "rooted in the despair of color," which Cooke explains a universal audience cannot understand. Rather, *Meridian* represents the struggle of the self, not only as an African American and a woman, but as a human being. As Cooke explains, the "intimacy" stage is "marked especially by an openness toward the turns of inner life as well as the force of things without, and by a conviction of being at home in any dimension of human experience" (41). To Cooke, "intimacy" allows the black author to focus on humanity rather than "blackness" (41). The goal of "intimacy," however, is not to "dissolve the black connection in some illusion of universality, but rather to affirm it in its distinctiveness while observing its play as a datum and as an instrument, and not just as a subject matter" (41). As black feminists like Deborah E. McDowell, Hazel V. Carby, and Nellie Y. McKay have suggested, racism, sexism, and class oppression are intricately bound, creating ties between black women and other marginalized groups. Freedom through the perspective of "intimacy" becomes a universal struggle—a struggle of whites, blacks, and other racial groups to affirm their own sense of humanity and

autonomy and to recognize the humanity and individuality of others. Walker “object[s] to ‘protest literature’ that focuses on whites as antagonists” and rather creates a work “that exposes the subconscious of a people, because the people’s dreams, imaginings, rituals, [and] legends ... are known to be important” (Anderson 41).

Before discovering her sense of self, Meridian’s environment traps her in the conventional role of black womanhood. Walker illustrates the constructions of black womanhood as an internalization of the tropes of white southern womanhood—elements of the “belle” and “lady” prevail at the aptly named Saxon College. The limiting nature of this construct continually creates tension for both the black and white women in Walker’s novel. Like her mother, Meridian is incapable of growth in her role as a wife and mother: “She was capable of thought and growth and action only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband” (40). Meridian’s mother only comes to this realization after her marriage, believing beforehand that married woman held “a mysterious inner life, secret from her, that made them willing, even happy to endure” (41). This illusion of happiness conceals the restricted life of conventional womanhood and convinces women that the “fettered” life of marriage brings happiness. Women reinforce this “happiness” because unhappiness would place their conventional “womanliness” into question. In her adolescence, Meridian’s mother “delight[s] in her independence [and] the adventure [of] fingering her possibilities, ... [and] want[s] more of life to happen to her” (40-41). Her economic independence as a schoolteacher gives her “the freedom of thinking out the possibilities of her life” even though she can only imagine two possibilities: staying in her home town to teach or moving somewhere else (40). Despite her cravings for independence and disillusionment in marriage and motherhood, Meridian’s mother imposes the same restrictions on her daughter. She, as

Meridian describes her, becomes “Black Motherhood personified” (96). Meridian’s mother provides her no information on sex but expects her daughter to be the chaste virgin of conventional womanhood: “her mother only cautioned her to ‘be sweet.’ She did not realize this was a euphemism for ‘Keep your panties up and your dress down,’ an expression she had heard and been puzzled by” (55). Because of the taboo nature of sex, Meridian’s mother discretely presents the topic because talking about sex is “unladylike” discourse. Meridian, however, soon becomes the object of male desire and loses her virginity at an early age.

Torn between the expectations of conventional culture and men’s desire, Meridian gives herself first to men and then to marriage and motherhood. Everything within Meridian’s culture denies the subjectivity of women and focuses on their sexuality: “She read *Sepia*, *Tan*, *True Confessions*, *Real Romances*, and *Jet*. According to these magazines, Woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on” (68). Within this culture, Meridian fulfills the role expected of her despite her distaste for sex. Pregnant “outside of wedlock,” Meridian faces society’s double standard—the school expels Meridian for her pregnancy but Eddie, the child’s father, still has the opportunity to earn a diploma (58). To Meridian, the child is a “ball and chain” (65) that prevents her from achieving “more of a life” (41) and keeps her bound to domestic life: “She hated the fact that although [Eddie] was still in school and she was not, he did not seem to know anything about books—or about the world. She learned more than he knew from watching TV quiz programs. He was not interested in ‘education’ ... but in finishing school” (67). Meridian conceives of her potential outside of marriage and motherhood and resents the freedom Eddie has as a male. When Meridian and Eddie break up, Eddie “assume[s], naturally, that the baby would remain

with her” because of a cultural conception that for women, motherhood should be “natural” (68). Feeling bound by motherhood, Meridian desires to kill the child in order to escape cultural expectations and achieve independence. She wants the freedom she sees in the life of other schoolgirls, girls who do not understand their independence from motherhood: “They simply did not know they were living their own lives—between twelve and fifteen—but assumed they lived someone else’s” (72). Already, these girls try to conform to images of womanhood by imitating the fantasy lives of “movie idols,” yet Meridian recognizes the freedom of their “fantasy” and the restrictions of her reality (72). The imitation of “movie idols,” however, is another example of the internalized tropes of white womanhood—the Hollywood standard of beauty is rooted in whiteness. When Meridian perceives an opportunity for individual and political freedom in SNCC, she abandons her child and accepts her mother’s shame in order to experience a new life.

In the Civil Rights Movement, Meridian seeks individual and political freedom from societal restrictions that constrain her as a woman and as an African American. Meridian’s mother, however, does not understand her daughter’s need to be part of the movement—“she had no desire to understand politics” (75). Unlike the “majority of black townspeople [who] were sympathetic to the Movement from the first, and told Meridian she was doing a good thing: typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated and keeping the Movement house open,” Meridian’s mother “was not sympathetic” to the Movement (82). Mrs. Hill asserts that Meridian “wasted a year of her life” in the Movement because she believes that segregation is natural and God-given: “God separated the sheeps from the goats and the black folks from the white It never bothered me to sit in the back of the bus, you get just a good a view and you don’t have all those nasty white assess passing you” (83). Mrs. Hill’s

acceptance of segregation reflects the teachings of the black church, which often taught its congregations to be content in suffering racial abuse and segregation and to wait for freedom in the afterlife. Implying that motherhood is the natural “Christian” desire of women, Meridian’s mother considers her “a monster” for not “want[ing] Eddie Jr.” (88). According to the ideal of Black Motherhood, “African women are expected to be mothers several times over, and if they do not measure up to the community’s expectations by choice or by natural necessity, then they must bear the stigma of being regarded as less than whole women” (Brown qtd. in Uwakweh 47). In Mrs. Hill’s eyes, Meridian loses her humanity and “womanliness” by striving for the conventional male desires of higher education and political action.

Although Meridian resolves to abandon motherhood in order to attain the freedom of education, she questions her conceptualization of “freedom” in light of a definition of freedom held by slave women:

If her mother had had children in slavery she would not, automatically, have been allowed to keep them, because they would not have belonged to her but the white person who “owned” them all. Meridian knew that enslaved woman had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from “Freedom” was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which

there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (90)

Meridian feels extreme guilt and a “spiritual degeneration” for abandoning the idea of “freedom” held by slave women. The voice of conventional “Christian” womanhood begins to haunt her thoughts and “curse[s] her existence—an existence that could not live up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before” (90). With her culture’s expectations ingrained in her mind, Meridian understands that this “voice” of hatred is her own: “the voice that said terrible things about her lack of value—was her own voice. It was talking to her, and it was full of hate” (91). Despite her “radical” decision to attend college, Meridian struggles to break free of expectations and restrictions imposed upon her by her mother and society. As Meridian soon discovers, the college only offers an illusion of freedom; it maintains the same cultural expectations that define women by either their virginity or motherhood.

At Saxon College, Meridian encounters an institutionalized form of her mother’s conception of womanhood. As a conservative religious school, Saxon fixates on female sexuality: “Saxon ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were always treated as if they were thirteen years old” (93). The reverence for virginity traditionally was applied to white women in the South, with black women subjected to stereotypes of primal sensuality. Saxon, however, uses the “belle” and “lady” tropes as the premise for constructing an acceptable form of black womanhood, which promotes the internalization of white superiority. In *Turning South Again*, Baker explains that “the significance of education for the culture of [white] dominance [...] is that it enforces and surveils mind and manner in the service of the ‘public good’” (63). With the reinforcement of white dominance as the “public good,” black education meant being “stripped of past habits,

language, and modes of being—and ‘incorporated,’ not into the body public but as the assimilated, marginal, darkly in-place shadow of civilization” (64). Within this hegemonic system, the education of blacks was an effort to emphasize their “otherness” to the “inherent” manners, civilization, and education of white society. The pre-pubescent nature of the Saxon girls is foreign to Meridian who hides “that [she] had been married and divorced and had had a child” (93). Like Meridian’s high school, Saxon expels girls for immoral or “‘decadent’ behavior” and holds them to “proper social rules” (94). The college believes that “social rules” will allow the girls “to be accepted as ... equal[s]” in the world (94). This idea is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington’s conservative doctrine of conformity to “white” society and its standards. According to this perspective, adherence to “social rules” would demonstrate black civility to whites who thought it absent from the black community. Meridian describes the effect of Saxon’s education of “ladyhood” on the female pupils and her difference from these ideal women: “They learned to make French food, English tea and German music without once having the urge to slip off the heavily guarded campus at five in the morning to photograph a strange tree as the light hit it just the right way—as Meridian had” (28). The girls become like the “docile” pupils Wright describes in *Black Boy*—silent and unquestioning—which aids their education in the domesticity of conventional womanhood: “Most of the students—timid, imitative, bright enough but not daring, were being ushered nearer to Ladyhood every day” (27). Unlike these girls, Meridian questions and explores her environment and the “social rules” imposed upon her. Saxon only “hold[s] out a promise of security and dignity to Meridian, if she will give herself and her convictions or instincts over in some self-diminshing way” (Cooke 159). Meridian, however, cannot accept losing herself to conform to the “white” ideals of Saxon. In Anne-Marion, Meridian finds a friend who

breaks free of female conventionality: “Anne-Marion was a deviate in the honors house: there because of her brilliance but only tolerated because it was clear that she was one, too, on whom true Ladyhood would never be conferred” (27). On Saxon’s campus, women like Meridian and Anne-Marion are either ignored or disciplined for their intelligence and outspokenness. For this reason, the symbol and story of the Sojourner tree perfectly illustrate the denial of blacks’ and women’s discursive subjectivity both during slavery and in the present day. Louvinie, a slave on the Saxon plantation, told African stories to the Saxon children under the Sojourner tree until one day, she tells a frightening story that causes one of the children to have a heart attack and die. As punishment, the slave master cuts out her tongue. Despite this loss, Louvinie mutely pleads for her tongue “because she knew the curse of her native land: Without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s choosing, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig” (34). As Louvinie understands, the intimate bond of language and the soul is essential to one’s subjectivity in the world. Like Master Saxon, Saxon College tries to deny black women any conceptualization of selfhood other than the “ladyhood” of a wife and mother.

Through Anne-Marion’s friendship, Meridian not only finds a kindred spirit but also discovers an organization that promises to offer freedom. Anne-Marion considers herself a “revolutionary,” with beliefs that align her with the Black Nationalist Movement. Anne-Marion believes in combating hate and violence with hate and violence—an approach that Meridian thinks will be ineffective in bringing peace and freedom to both the black population and the nation. This nationalist movement tactic stems from the teaching of Franz Fanon who “felt that true psychological liberation from colonial domination was impossible if independence was granted . . . rather than seized by

armed struggle” (King 173). Fanon’s “therapeutics of violence,” however, only stifles human progress (174). By combating hate with violence, the oppressed becomes the oppressor and thereby takes ownership of the oppressors’ tyrannical methods of mastery. As Richard H. King describes, the black nationalists wanted “white patriarchal domination ... to be destroyed, only to be replaced by the ‘fraternal’ contract among (generally male) revolutionaries who then would reestablish black male patriarchy of sorts The ‘best’ of the new black culture looked distressingly like the worst of the old white one” (193). Anne-Marion expresses the black nationalists’ ideology in a conversation about landownership with Meridian:

Both girls had lived and studied enough to know they despised capitalism; they perceived it had done well in America because it had rested directly on their fathers’ and mothers’ backs. The difference between them was this: Anne-Marion did not know if she would be a success as a capitalist, while Meridian did not think she could enjoy owning things other could not have. Anne-Marion wanted black to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people. But Meridian wanted the destruction of the rich as a class and the eradication of all personal economic preserves. Her senior thesis was based on the notion that no one should be allowed to own more land than could be worked on in a day, by hand. Anne-Marion thought this was quaint. When black people can own the seashore, she said, I want miles and miles of it. And I never want to see a face I didn’t invite walking across my sand.” (122)

Anne-Marion wants the economic power held by the oppressive white society and hopes blacks will eventually overtake and dominate this social hierarchy. Conversely, Meridian

desires economic equality for whites and blacks, with no class ruling over the other. The universal benefit of Meridian's economic perspective amounts to freedom for all members of society. Meridian cannot accept class or racial oppression and struggles to adopt Anne-Marion's revolutionary perspective. Like the black nationalists, Anne-Marion advocates violence for the attainment of black freedom—an idea Meridian only waveringly adopts.

Attending revolutionary group meetings, Meridian learns that membership requires voicing one's willingness to kill. Taunted with the label of "coward," Meridian understands that "to join this group she must make a declaration of her willingness to die for the Revolution, which she had done. She must also answer the question 'Will you kill for the Revolution?' with a positive yes. This, however, her tongue could not manage" (13-14). Meridian can commit to giving her life for the Revolution, but she cannot accept the charge to kill for it. Meridian questions what killing will do to the souls of the black community: "When she was transformed in church it was always by the purity of the singers' should, which she could actually hear, the purity that lifted their songs like a flight of doves above her music-drunken head. If they committed murder—and to her even revolutionary murder was murder—what would the music be like?" (14). Although the group rationalizes revolutionary murder as necessary, Meridian believes killing will tarnish the freedom attained by the group. In fact, she perceives that murder will bound them in the slavery of guilt—a feeling she expresses frequently in the narrative (40). Even though Meridian promises to "kill for the Revolution," she questions the group's ability to take violent action:

This group might or might not do something revolutionary. It was after all a group of students, of intellectuals, converted to a belief in violence only

after witnessing the extreme violence, against black dissidents, of the federal government and police. Would they rob a bank? Bomb a landmark? Blow up a police station? Would they ever have to be face to face with the enemy, guns drawn? Perhaps. Perhaps not. (15)

Meridian tries to justify her membership in the group by citing the group's "intellectual" reasoning for violent action and by determining the unlikelihood of the group's opportunities for violence. Even though she believes the opportunity for violence is small, Meridian feels unsettled by her pledge for violence: "'But that isn't the point!' the small voice [inside her] screeched. The point was, she could not think lightly of shedding blood" (15). Meridian cannot give voice to an ideology she does not believe in, even if that ideology will never call for her action. The individual need for self-understanding and self-purity keeps Meridian from fully committing to the group mentality. Like Richard Wright, Meridian refuses to lose her selfhood and voice to the restrictive demands of any movement. When Meridian expresses her hesitancy toward killing, Anne-Marion chastises her wavering commitment:

"Then you will kill for the Revolution, not just die for it?" Anne Marion's once lovely voice, beloved voice. "Like a fool!" the voice added, bitterly and hard.

"I don't know."

"Shee-it...!"

"But can you say you probably will? That you will."

"No." (18-19)

Urging Meridian to accept the Revolution's ideology, Anne-Marion understands that without the commitment to kill, Meridian must leave the group. Upon hearing Meridian's

hesitancy, “everyone turn[s] away” from Meridian, and Anne-Marion immediately questions where she will go: ““What will you do? Where will you go?” Only Anne-Marion still cared enough to ask, though her true eyes—with their bright twinkle—had been replaced with black marbles” (19). Anne-Marion cannot conceive a life outside the revolutionary group; the group informs her understanding of self and hardens her empathy for human life through its ideology. Although Meridian confirms that “violence is as American as cherry pie” and asserts that “nonviolence has failed,” she does not believe the revolutionary community can attain freedom through its violent ideology (18). To Meridian, revolution must affirm the individual rather than kill it by violence or by dogmatic restrictions. In “uphold[ing] the spiritual ideals of a human liberation moment,” Meridian develops the “austerity and strength of purpose needed for true revolution: the struggle with the recalcitrant self” (Stein 130).

Joining a SNCC-like civil rights group, Meridian again searches for freedom inside an organized movement. Her search, however, leads her to understand that “impersonal institutions,” like Saxon and mass organized movements, “can smother as much as protect us” (Cooke 159). This group engages in the “Freedom marches” symbolic of nonviolent protest, yet dissension and violence within the group ultimately reveals the fragility of this movement. Truman Held, a leader in the organization, holds beliefs similar to the revolutionaries despite his unwillingness to kill:

I used to raise my arm and shout, “Death to the honkies, too” said Truman, but I understood I didn’t really mean it. Not really. Not like men who attacked the police during the riots. I thought of what it would be like to kill, when I thought I was going to be drafted. In the army killing would be alright, I supposed In the army you would simply kill to keep

yourself alive. Revolutionary killing is systematic. You line people up who have abused you, as a group, and you simply eradicate them, like you would a disease. (204)

Truman's "academic" rational bothers Meridian who acknowledges that the "disease" Truman defends eradicating is "a disease with face, with children ... human voices" (204). Unlike Truman, Meridian cannot objectify any section of humanity. This type of objectification becomes problematic within the civil rights group as tensions rise concerning the role of whites in the movement.

Toward the latter part of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, groups like SNCC ended white involvement in the movement. Although SNCC "starte[d] out idealistically committed to nonviolence and an interracial beloved community, by the late 1960s [its] battle-toughened troops endorsed retaliatory self-defense, black nationalism, and the overthrow of capitalism" (Lawson 17). The adoption of Black Nationalist ideology led SNCC to remove white activists in order to promote the solidarity of "'the people,' a locution implying a unified totality with a single collective identity" (King 152). Movement rhetoric thus changed from "Freedom Now" and "Black and White Together" to "Black Power" (King 155, Danielson 321). When the group forces Lynne, a white worker in the movement, to abandon her activism, Meridian notes that "the Movement itself was changing. Lynne was no longer welcome at any of the meetings. She was excluded from the marches. She was no longer allowed to write articles for the paper" (146). Lynne becomes an object of black hatred because she is white, and her husband, Truman, encounters hostility because of his marriage to her. As Lynne suggests, Truman marries her when "Black and White Together" is fashionable and "run[s] off as soon as black became beautiful" (160): "'You can go home now,' is what Truman said to me.

Like, this little flirtation of yours to find out how the other half lives is over now, so you can just take your sorry white ass home” (192). On Meridian, Truman projects the image of black womanhood and “brown strength” and believes that she “would not mind being a resource for someone else.... here was a woman to rest in, as a ship must have a port. As a train must have a shed” (149). Truman also projects the image of black motherhood on Meridian when he begs her to “have my beautiful black babies” (120). Meridian, like Lynne, becomes an object that symbolizes Truman’s adherence to different trends in the movement (Yoon 194).

Lynne’s objectification, however, later becomes a brutal show of black hatred. To Tommy Odds, Lynne is “guilty of whiteness” (142) and deserving of rape: “Tommy Odds thought she was not a human being, as if her whiteness, the mystique of it, the danger of it, the historically verboten nature of it, encouraged him to attempt to destroy her without any feelings of guilt” (176). In a racial reversal of *Miss Jane Pittman*’s Tee Bob and Mary Agnes, Lynne accepts the rape as punishment for her whiteness: “She lay instead thinking of his feelings, his hardships, of the way he was black and belonged to people who lived without hope; she thought about the loss of his arm. She felt her own guilt” (172). Recognizing this guilt, Tommy Odds abuses Lynne’s need to “aton[e] for his sins” and uses her to assert his power over the white race (179). Lynne gives herself as a sacrifice to “white sin” and thus accepts the movement’s new black separatist ideology. By raping Lynne, Tommy affirms his “manhood”—a quality of “self-respect and assertion” the black nationalists “identified as a particularly male need” (King 195). As the movement changes from togetherness to Black Nationalist separatism, Meridian begins to look to SNCC’s past history of grassroots movements to achieve political and personal freedom.

Meridian leaves the leader-oriented groups of SNCC and the Revolutionaries to initiate a grassroots, community-oriented movement that will allow blacks to be leaders in their own struggle for freedom. Meridian's grassroots ideology is reminiscent of SNCC's original "theory of organizing that stressed the way in which a sense of community self-respect and self-determination grew from the community's efforts to generate its own programs and leaders" (King 143). By generating programs and leaders within the community, the community develops a sense of agency and self-respect that aids their freedom struggle. When Meridian expresses that she will adopt this "old" Civil Rights Movement strategy, Anne-Marion questions the success of this type of movement:

"I'll go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights workers use to do."

"You're not serious?" (19)

Meridian's plan seems ridiculous to Anne-Marion who believes that national, militant movement rather than local movement will succeed in bringing widespread change to black life in America. When Truman visits Meridian and sees her grassroots activity, he expresses an opinion similar to Anne-Marion's: "You make yourself catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere" (12). He criticizes her fight to allow the black children to see the visiting freak show, claiming that her action is meaningless because of the ridiculous nature of the cause. Although the town's segregationists policies surprise him,—“But the Civil Rights Movement changed all that!”—Truman believes the struggle for freedom is over (8). Truman, like the “white liberals and deserting Civil Rights sponsors” Walker describes in “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?”, is “quick to justify...disaffection from the Movement by claiming that it is all over” without considering the “changes in [the] personal lives [of

blacks] because of the influence of people in the Movement” (120-121). Truman belongs to the group Walker identifies as “the very class that owes its new affluence to the Movement [and] now refuses to support the organizations that made its success possible, and has retreated from its concern for black people who are poor” (“Choosing to Stay at Home” 168). Regardless of the cause, Meridian recognizes that she must fight inequality and prejudice whatever the cause and pressure the local white government to change its discriminatory policies.

Truman’s disregard for grassroots organization reflects the “gendered duality of local/national” movements in which the local is the feminine and the national, leadership-oriented movement is the masculine (Green 60). Laurie B. Green explains that:

the binary opposition between local and nation ... usually assigns women to the local. In some cases, this movement inadvertently neglects the far-reaching consequences of women’s activism. Acknowledging women as the backbone of local campaigns as organizers, networkers, and supporters does not necessarily lead to assessing their impact on national politics and leaders. If the national is construed as the place from which initiative and leadership emanate, then the local can mistakenly be relegated to a dependent or satellite status—a source of energy and momentum, but not direction. (60)

Truman discounts Meridian’s activism because it has no apparent implications for national change. The “feminine” nature of Meridian’s local activism is counter to the “masculine” national movements Truman perceives as politically meaningful. Truman considers Meridian’s methods of action dated and unviable, explaining to her that “Revolution was a thing of the sixties Do you realize no one is thinking about these

things anymore?” (206). Truman views the struggle for civil rights as a movement rooted in the past, but Meridian believes the struggle must continue because the people continue to grapple with the movement’s tenets: “But don’t you think the basic questions raised by King and Malcolm and the rest still exist? Don’t you think people, somewhere deep inside, are still attempting to deal with them?” (206). As Meridian explains, she believes that true Revolution is not found in killing off the oppressor but in teaching people how to live in the post-civil rights era: “revolution would not begin, do you think, with an act of murder—wars might begin that way—but with teaching After all, people want to be taught how to live” (205-206). Meridian “arrives at a definition of revolution that affirms life rather than death” and involves self-transformation in the struggle of self-questioning (Stein 141). Meridian describes teaching as a communal activity, not led by a single teacher but by the community in both a collective and individual search for answers to their freedom struggle: “I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don’t see it as a handing down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want” (206). Meridian recognizes the coercive force of mass national movements and their political agendas and believes each individual must decide what “items” of freedom he or she is willing to fight for.

To attain equality for the black community, Meridian not only acts as a leader in her “performances” of protest but asks the people to engage in the fight for equality by voting. Because the 1960s Civil Rights Movement changes little for the community in which Meridian lives, the people do not believe their vote will have any significance in the white-dominated political system. Rather than misleading or falsely persuading the people, Meridian affirms and answers their disbelief in politic’s ability to affect change:

“[Voting] may be useless. Or maybe it’s the beginning of using your voice. You have to get used to using your voice. You start on simple things and move on” (225).

Meridian makes “action” available to the people by emphasizing the “simple things” they can struggle for and achieve. Most importantly, the people must develop a voice for themselves rather than allowing a leader to speak for them. As Jane Mansbridge explains, the “individual act of voting ... is useless when considered from the standpoint of individual self-interest, but not when considered from the standpoint of political duty or solidarity or keeping faith with one’s own beliefs” (qtd. in King 66). To Meridian, voting not only signifies political freedom but the achievement of individual agency and voice. In the post-civil rights era, Meridian perceives the importance of the individual and the community in securing the rights and freedom promised by the national government in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As Meridian understands, legal rights are meaningless to communities absorbed in the racial hatred and prejudice that legality cannot dissolve.

Although Meridian acts as a leader within the community, she emphasizes the important interdependency of the community and herself. When Meridian leaves the militant group, she returns to the South to “remain close to the people—to see them, to be with them, to understand them and herself, the people who now fed her and tolerated her and also, in a fashion, cared about her” (19). For Meridian, being part of community requires an intimate knowledge of both the people and the self—an intimacy that creates a bond of mutual care. Because of Meridian’s leadership and “performances,” the people provide her with material resources: “Meridian was living in an adequately furnished house that the black community—having witnessed one of her performances and the paralysis that follows it—provided” (153). The exchange between Meridian and the community is both spiritual and material. Meridian acts on the behalf of the community

by giving herself spiritually and psychically to their struggle, and the community responds by following and providing for her. The community follows Meridian in one of her “performances” when she brings a drowned black boy to the mayor’s office to demonstrate the effects of the city’s segregationist policies—because the city closed the public swimming pool to blacks, the boy resolved to cool off in the dangerous reservoir (208-209). When Meridian collapses and later awakes, the people respond by promising her aid and memorial for her leadership to the community: “When she was up again they came to her and offered her everything, including the promise that they would name the next girl child they had after her. Instead she made them promise they would learn, as their smallest resistance to the murder of their children, to use the vote” (209). Memorial and aid are only symbolic and material to Meridian; what she desires is a transformation of the community into a self-freeing agent of change—a community that can survive without the presence of her leadership. Meridian believes in the “Oneness” of the community and the self, an idea that allows her to give herself completely to the struggle of the black community. Meridian explains that for whites and blacks, “the years in America had created them One Life” (220). Jace Anderson explains that this “‘One Life’ encompasses all of those affected by racism—which Meridian attests, are all citizens. Meridian’s fight to continue her life is a fight for the nation’s life” (42-43). Affirming the importance of a communal “One Life,” Walker explains that “existence....means being part of the world community” that encompasses all cultures (“The Civil Rights Movement” 125). By denying herself and materialism, Meridian attains “intimacy” with the community in its “Oneness.” In making herself “one” with the community, Meridian discovers her willingness to fight and die for the community.

Within the revolutionary group, Meridian cannot commit to the militant ideology of killing for the revolution; however, she discovers a willingness to engage in retaliatory action after committing herself to the “One Life” of the community. Like Miss Jane Pittman, Meridian enters the church skeptically at first and discovers its freeing power. Meridian explains that she “had always thought of the black church as mainly a reactionary power” but discovers a “new” church “where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently, and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were taken seriously” (218). Meridian expects the compliant and “docile” church of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* yet encounters a politically and socially engaged congregation that strives to uphold and struggle for the “Oneness” of a free black society. The church valorizes a man’s son who fought and died “on behalf of us” and promises to “protect what [the boy] fought for ...” (219). The “intimacy” of the church community and the great sadness of the boy’s father provokes within Meridian a willingness to fight and die for the black freedom struggle: “the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own she made a promise to the red-eyed man herself: that yes, indeed to would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again” (219-220). Although “Meridian’s dedication to her promise does not remain constant,” she wavers because of her intense recognition of the humanity of all people, good or bad (220). Meridian’s wavering commitment to killing reflects her occasional need for self-defense—not an infrequent adoption of militancy. Historian Emilye Crosby encourages scholars to “move beyond [this] framework of nonviolence versus self-defense/violence dichotomy” to recognize the “complex picture” of self-defense in the civil rights movement (222). She explains that:

the idea that there was a natural progression whereby self-defense became more militant and political as it was organized and visible falls apart when we examine it through the lens of local studies. While there are some identifiable trends and patterns, it is also evident that to a considerable extent African American activists made a choice based on their priorities, the tools available to them, and the specific contexts of their local circumstances. (235)

Meridian recognizes that her “local circumstances” may call for violence in the form of self-defense, but she refrains from engaging in the militant bloodshed of revolutionary groups. Regardless of her stance on violence, Meridian holds firm to her commitment to die for the community. When the local government threatens her protest with an army tank, she explains her pact with the people: “We have an understanding That if somebody has it go it might as well be the person who’s ready” (11). By making herself “ready” to die, Meridian frees herself from the fear, oppression, and materialism that denies agency.

Meridian’s understanding and denial of self allows her to belong wherever she finds herself. She becomes intimate with others, experiencing what they experience by way of renunciations: “she could [not] enjoy owning things others could not have” (Cooke 174). Meridian extends this freedom of the self to Truman by “set[ting] [him] free” from the restraints of gender-oriented romantic love” (238). When Meridian leaves the community, she appoints Truman as a leader and gives to him the intimate “Oneness” of community: “It was his house now, after all. His cell. Tomorrow the people would come and bring him food. Someone would come and milk his cow. They would wait patiently for him to perform, to take them along the next guideless step. Perhaps he

would” (242). Like Meridian, Truman will experience the intimate interdependency of the community and the self. As Truman “gradually abandons his Volvo, his white women, his art—and even his troublesome masculinity,” he “has moments ‘when he fe[els] intensely maternal’” (Danielson 325, Walker 228). Truman’s “maternal” feelings reflect Walker’s concept of “womanism”—an ideal “committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female” (“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” xi). Together, Truman and the people must struggle and learn the same freedom of self Meridian achieves—a conflict of the soul which “must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (242). Meridian’s “power” becomes “not that of being present, but of a serenely strenuous presence, in the spirit, in the minds of all she meets” (Cooke 176). The spiritual “presence” of Meridian is a persistent calling for the self-development of the community and Truman. In this post-civil rights era, the mass movement evolves into a personal search for self-respect and self-knowledge that affirms the “Oneness” of the national community.

Meridian engages in the “One Life” of the community by exploring the history of the freedom struggle. The pure “music” and soul of the black community prevents Meridian from committing to revolutionary murder. She explains that:

she felt herself to be, not holding on to something from the past, but held by something in the past: by the memory of old black men in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of a camera, never shifted their position but looked directly back; by the sight of young girls singing in a country choir, their hair shining with brushing and grease, their voices the voices of angels. (14)

The resiliency and purity of former generations “holds” Meridian from participating in militant action. Although Meridian eventually recognizes that this “extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity” rather than choice, she refuses to mar their history and the history of the black community with the impurity of violence (130). Anne-Marion accuses Meridian of “being weak and insensitive to History;” however, Meridian’s “weak[ness]” to history is what propels her leadership and commitment to the movement. Frenzella E. DeLancey explains that:

If Meridian is to learn from the community, she must have some respect for its history and culture; thus, if “some pathetic, distracted old marcher wished to bend Meridian’s ear about his or her Jesus, Meridian would stand patiently and listen.” Demonstrating a willingness to learn from the people, Meridian “was constantly wanting to know about the songs: ‘Where did such and such a one come from? Or ‘How many years do you think black people have been singing this’” (28). This communal knowledge and history prepares Meridian for the role she assumes at the end of her transformative period. (5)

Meridian’s understanding of the community’s history is essential to her role as its leader and to her incorporation into its “Oneness.” Meridian believes that memory of the past will move the people to struggle for the “One Life” of the national, black and white community. As leader in this “One Life,” Meridian promises that:

I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of

it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (221)

The song of the people continues to inform Meridian's vision of the collective soul of the black community. Understanding history connects generations and establishes a united struggle that serves as a reference for future generations.

Unlike Meridian, Anne-Marion gives no reverence to history. Leading a riot on Saxon's campus, Anne-Marion destroys The Sojourner—a tree that serves as a reminder of slavery's cruelty. Rather than preserve the tree's symbolic history, the rioters "in a fury of confusion and frustration ... worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree" (39). The "confusion and frustration" of the rioters reflects the hostile, reactive nature of the revolutionary movement. In their "fury," the "music tree" and the pure, soul music the black community becomes lost. As Michael G. Cooke explains:

The destruction of the Sojourner is the ultimate act of group dynamic in *Meridian*, and significantly it displays the group undoing of the good of its members. A vicious paradox appears, for the members of the group proceed in the closet concert and yet for farthest from awareness of themselves, of one another or of one another's good. (169)

Rather than uplifting community, the rioters' group act destroys both self-awareness and community because of the blind rage of their action. Although the idea of a "soul freedom" isolates Meridian in her search for self-respect and self-knowledge, she believes that a continued struggle for personal and collective freedom will reveal truth to the those involved in the struggle: "all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe

we will now the truth” (242). Local grassroots organizations, as scholars now recognize, were “preeminently ... movement[s] for self-determination rather than a movement for integration of the races or even for equal civil rights” (Moye 166). Although Meridian recognizes the importance of political freedom, the freedom of “self-determination” and self-respect is the emphasis of her struggle. For Meridian, the struggle for freedom is not merely an outward action but “an idea [that...] penetrate[s] her life” (242). This struggle for “freedom,” as Walker depicts in Meridian and describes in “Choosing to Stay at Home,” is “a personal and lonely battle, [in which] one faces down fears of today so that those of tomorrow might be engaged” (170). By strengthening community through grassroots movement and the denial of her material self, Meridian attains freedom in the “Oneness” of community.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

By exploring the idea of freedom in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, and Alice Walker's *Meridian*, literature's great value in rethinking the length of the Civil Rights Movement becomes perceptibly clear. While *Miss Jane Pittman* and *Meridian* touch upon the movement's "one halcyon decade," the novels focus on the civil rights struggle in eras prior to and after the recognized Civil Rights Movement (Hall 1234). Wright's *Black Boy* presents a picture of black life during the 1910s-1940s—a period of isolated, individual struggle for the attainment of civil rights. The concept of "freedom" and the hope for black political and social freedom in America changes significantly from *Black Boy* to *Meridian*. Furthermore, the novels provide different approaches and aims for organized movement and protest as the freedom movement widens to promote freedom from racism and prejudice for not only African Americans but the entire nation.

While Wright's *Black Boy* paints a bleak picture of black life in America, devoid of any organized movement for fear of Jim Crow's tactics of violence, the novel offers hope for a later movement as a revolutionary spirit develops in black America: "for it is in them, though they may not know it, that a revolution has taken place and is biding its time to translate itself into a new and strange way of life" (302). The promise of a "collective deliverance" for Wright's time, however, was an impossibility as racism and prejudice "stunted [the] life" of the community spirit (King 28, Wright 197). For Wright,

progress in the freedom struggle first required a change in white America, yet he acknowledged that blacks ultimately must resolve the “Negro problem” since whites seemed blind to their plight (297). By broadening the scope of racial tension to include the North, Wright implicated the nation for its involvement in the racism that suppressed black freedom. Nevertheless, the ability to affect change in America and attain freedom remained a distant hope for Wright—a struggle he perceived as a “long” and slow political, social, and psychological effort for blacks and whites.

In Ernest Gaines’s *Miss Jane Pittman* and Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, community is an essential component in the black freedom struggle. While fear initially stifles the collective power of Jane’s community, the people overcome their reliance on leader-led movement and ultimately recognize that widespread movement affects greater change. *Miss Jane Pittman* epitomizes the idea of the “long” civil rights movement by encompassing pre-emancipation slavery to the beginning of the recognized 1960s Civil Rights Movement. With the arrival of emancipation, Miss Jane and the former slaves explore the idea of “freedom” yet never fully attain the political and social liberty the word implies. Like Walker’s *Meridian*, Miss Jane acknowledges, with the story of Tee Bob and Mary Agnes, that racism and prejudice negatively affect both blacks and whites. Although Gaines’s novel ends at the Movement’s beginnings, *Miss Jane Pittman* pictures the autonomy and collective power of Miss Jane and her community as the promise of future political and social freedom for blacks in America.

Alice Walker’s *Meridian* explores the unfinished work of the recognized Civil Rights Movement and the need for the continuation of grassroots efforts in each American community. Unlike the leader-led Civil Rights Movement, *Meridian*’s grassroots movements place responsibility on the individual for enacting change in his or

her community. For Meridian, the interdependency of the self and the communally shared experience of racism and prejudice in America creates a “One Life” that includes blacks and whites in the struggle for freedom (221). As an African American and a woman, Meridian recognizes a universal, human struggle that is personal and individual and yet affirmative of the shared humanity of all people. As the concept of a “freedom struggle” changes from Wright’s *Black Boy* to Walker’s *Meridian*, the scope of the “long” civil rights movement widens, providing a more accurate picture of racism and prejudice as a national issue rather than an exclusively Southern problem. By limiting the freedom struggle to the 1960s movement, we overlook the unfinished work of Walker’s *Meridian* and ignore the contemporary economic and educational disparities caused by racism and prejudice in the American political and social system.

Furthermore, with current debates surrounding the supposed end of Southern Studies and African American literature, this “long” approach argues that the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement necessitates the continuation of these genres and fields of research. Although the demise of Jim Crow legislation ended the presence of *de jure* segregation in the United States, the American legal system continues to create and maintain inequalities among racial and social groups. America has yet to enter a post-racial era, and until that time we must recognize and expose the inequalities that continue to create a divide in our country. Southern Studies and African American literature are relevant to this continued discussion of racial inequality in America; therefore, we must avoid calling an end to these genres and fields or else we will neglect their important place in contemporary society.

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