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Beyond the Overseer's Eye:
Carceral Surveillance, Intimacy, and Black Resistance in
Ernest J. Gaines's *Of Love and Dust*

YAZDAN MAHMOUDI
University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA

Abstract

This article reads Ernest J. Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* through the plantation gaze theory and the linked frameworks of carceral surveillance and the policing of intimacy. Building on insights offered by Thadious M. Davis, who presents a reading of Gaines's Louisiana as a place where the plantation and the prison coexist and serve for disciplining bodies and spaces, and Jenna Grace Sciuto, whose argument emphasizes that intimate relations become publicly observable, I argue that the surveillance regime presented in *Of Love and Dust* is visual, spatial, communal, and erotic. Thus, Marcus challenges the power of the regime in question not only through opacity and the returned gaze, but also through open resistance and self-fashioning, as well as through his erotic relationship with Louise, which jeopardizes the existing racial-sexual order of the plantation. Furthermore, Bonbon does not emerge here as an observer exercising sovereign power; instead, he proves to be an endangered and vulnerable figure who is himself subjected to surveillance by the whites (Marshall Hebert) and by his own quarters.

Keywords: gaze, surveillance, incarceration, intimacy, opacity, plantation, Ernest J. Gaines

Introduction

The plantation setting has played an important role in the analysis of how American literary texts have produced a racial gaze, which makes visible the Black body in relation to the whites' controlling modes of seeing. This theoretical model can be useful in the reading of *Of Love and Dust*¹ by

Ernest J. Gaines, particularly in those moments when Bonbon tries to dominate Marcus through spectacle, humiliation, and bodily surveillance. However, in this text, we need more than just the concept of “gaze” to fully understand power relations.

Set in 1948, the novel takes place on a plantation that grows cotton and corn on its vast property in Louisiana. *Of Love and Dust* tells the tale of Marcus Payne, a young Black man bound to the landowner, Marshall Hebert, after he has bonded out of prison, where he works until he pays back a debt. This method of labor binding is a practice based on the exploitation of the newly freed slaves. Jim Kelly, a Black tractor driver, provides the narration about the actions of those involved in this story. Sidney Bonbon, a white Cajun overseer, rules the black workers by means of humiliation and fear; Bonbon rides his black stallion right behind Marcus working in the fields. Marcus is rebellious and does not submit easily; he falls into love with Louise, Bonbon's white wife who lives in isolation at her husband's plantation, therefore triggering a sequence of complex events.

Thadious M. Davis provides a particularly helpful perspective here. Referring to Gaines's Louisiana, she contends that “the plantation and the prison both attempt to exercise disciplinary control over bodies as well as over spaces” (265). Such a perception becomes especially pertinent to Marcus, who is not only subjected to intense scrutiny as a laborer but is actually a bonded man who finds himself in a plantation system that acts as a continuation of the penalty. Both the field, the quarters, and the oversight of the overseer become parts of a wider complex of custody. Jenna Grace Sciuto's perspective in this context facilitates a better understanding of this complex issue. According to her theory, the intimate is constantly “brought under public scrutiny” (5), and in line with Sciuto's approach, Ann Laura Stoler claims that “matters of the intimate are critical sites for the consolidation of colonial power” (“Intimidation of Empire” 4). Such an idea sheds light upon Gaines's narrative, which is characterized by interracial attraction, scandal, eavesdropping, and the potential of being accused.

What follows is a reading of *Of Love and Dust* as a narrative of the plantation as a carceral and intimate apparatus of surveillance wherein

control functions through labor discipline, racial subordination, community supervision, and sexual regulation. It suggests that Marcus is able to fight the system of plantation rule not only through opacity and the reversed gaze, but also through explicit gestures of rebellion, self-reinvention, and intimate engagement. For his part, Bonbon does not come off as a figure of omniscient sovereignty but as one who is under constant watch and is himself a source of instability, subservient to the authority of Marshall Hebert and to that of the quarters. Reading the novel through Davis and Sciuto thus reveals that Gaines's politics of resistance are not only visual but also carceral, spatial, communal, and sexual. In addition, this framework can help situate Gaines's text in the existing scholarship on *Of Love and Dust*. Diane Russo has explored the mediation of various worlds of discourse and knowledge through Jim's narration, demonstrating that he is anything but an objective witness to what happens to Marcus. At the same time, Maria Hebert-Leiter discusses how the text exposes "the possibility of love and acceptance regard less of racial notions of superiority and inferiority" (104) and the complexities of race, kinship, and intimacy in Louisiana South. Based on the insights of the existing scholarship, this essay demonstrates how Gaines's narrative voice and the world of the plantation create a complex system of political significance in which looking, listening, and desire take on an important meaning.

The Carceral Plantation: Surveillance, Discipline, and the Limits of Overseer Power

Davis's analysis of the geography of Gaines's Louisiana shows that, for Gaines, the plantation is not just an agrarian landscape; it is a space defined by confinement. Davis argues that both the plantation and the prison function as systems designed to control not only the physical movements of people but also the spaces they inhabit (265). This insight helps explain Marcus's initial situation at the start of the novel. He is not just another slave laborer who works for an abusive overseer. He is actually a bonded man moved from jail to work in a field used for punishment. As Jim puts it about Bonbon's appearance on horseback with

rope and sack, "Now they were going to give him a taste of what it meant to kill and then let yourself be bonded out of jail" (Gaines 37). In the current context, the plantation does not just take labor from its workers, but enacts incarceration through labor, degradation, and control. Gaines makes it clear that the logic of the plantation is that of incarceration before the main punishment in the field in the sense that it represents an enclosure rather than an escape from confinement. Marcus makes it abundantly clear when he rejects his placement on the grounds that he should not be made to pay for his right to defend himself. Jim cannot make Marcus see things differently since Marcus recognizes that he is not being offered an opportunity for rehabilitation or labor. In this way, Gaines establishes a clear distinction between legal freedom and freedom itself since Marcus escapes from prison, but he ends up in yet another kind of confinement through the plantation.

Gaines highlights this carceral character in the surveillance Bonbon conducts. Bonbon drives right behind Marcus such that "the horse was so close to Marcus, I'm sure Marcus could feel the horse's hot breath on the back of his neck" (42). This is no mere form of monitoring; it is an act of intimidating surveillance. Bonbon's silence, his rifle, the crocker sack, and the rope transform the farm into a penal stage. Whereas the jail punishes Marcus by isolating him within its walls, the plantation punishes him with physical weariness and environmental exposure.

The authority of Bonbon is far from total. Bonbon is being observed just as much as he observes, and this point is confirmed by Gaines time and again. Marshall Hebert holds the highest level of authority on the field; his power surpasses the power of any overseer. In one of the pivotal scenes of the novel, Marshall did not take "his eyes" off Marcus (181); Jim recognizes that even though "partly turned away, Bonbon could still see everything through the window," including what Marshall sees (181). Bonbon is therefore not a sovereign observer but a middle figure in a larger hierarchy. The nature of this hierarchy becomes apparent once Jim understands that there can be no appeals, because Marshall "was the law. He was police, he was judge, he was jury" (Gaines 159). What is interesting about Gaines's depiction of the plantation world is not only its likeness to the world of law but also its absorption of that

world. The Marshall-Bonbon relationship is even closer, both physically and psychologically, than relationships between employer and overseer. Miss Julie hints that “Two people got killed long ago. People say Bonbon did it for Mr. Marshall,” a revelation that helps explain Bonbon’s strange mixture of theft, impunity, and usefulness within the Hebert order (Gaines 19). This background proves relevant since it makes it clear that Bonbon’s place is maintained not just through racial tradition, but through compromise, secrecy, and even criminal labor. He is not merely an employee of Marshall’s, but rather is involved in the invisible world of violence and crime. In this way, Gaines creates a complex representation of power in the plantation in which the institution is presented not as a neatly structured social order, but as one that is itself compromised and complicated.

The scenes in Baton Rouge bring into relief all of Bonbon's weaknesses. His power does not work away from the plantation, where his command lacks its potency. Jim remarks that Bonbon was “helpless in a case like this” and that “he didn’t know how to talk to a black man unless he was giving orders” (Gaines 119). This reveals the localized and performative nature of his authority. While on the plantation he rides, watches, intimidates and acts big, away from it he looks awkward, helpless and at a loss for words. Gaines shows Bonbon's authority as one not based on the natural sovereignty of whites but on the authority of the overseer, which exists only when it is performed. In view of this, Bonbon's theatrically masculine persona is more than an act of style. The horse, rifle, silence, and costume with which he impresses the blacks are not just elements of the overseer performance anymore, but visible marks of an insecure power. This is why he cannot afford to be distant from Marcus, not because he is all-powerful but because he cannot afford to fail. He must make domination felt physically because its symbolic authority is unstable. This is why the plantation in *Of Love and Dust* is first and foremost a carceral space rather than an image. It is not enough to say who is looking at whom. It is more important to understand the attempts of power to keep bodies in place through spatial dominance, the threat of violence, and a jurisprudence that collapsed into the figure of the white planters. The case of Bonbon's anxiety in Baton Rouge demonstrates how

the speech acts of power rely on the hierarchy of the plantation. His authority operates best when the racial conventions and knowledge of the territory support him. Otherwise, he is uncertain about speaking like a master and feels uncomfortable embodying whiteness in any other setting than the plantation. This is why Gaines highlights the fragility of Bonbon's masculinity. His speech acts, which look intimidating in the field, become awkward outside, thus reinforcing his status as a part of the machinery of power.

The quarters also observe Bonbon from below, which means that surveillance in the novel does not move only from white authority downward. It becomes clear from Gaines's writing that Bonbon's behavior is well-known among Blacks in terms of their own collective experience. His treatment of Pauline, his public humiliations, and even the strange dynamics surrounding his children all become legible to the quarters as signs of disorder inside the white household itself. Therefore, in a sense, Bonbon is a person who inhabits two different positions: on the one hand, he is an overseer to be afraid of, but, on the other hand, he also is seen by the people in the quarters as someone who behaves improperly and morally unworthy of being in charge. This matters because it prevents us from treating surveillance in the novel as one-directional. Bonbon is not simply the eye of the plantation. He is one of its watched bodies, too.

Policing Intimacy: Louise, Aunt Margaret, and the Public Life of Desire

Sciuto's framework proves particularly insightful for an analysis of how Gaines moves beyond field surveillance to the regulation of intimacy. As mentioned previously, she notes that systems of racial and sexual control bring private relations under public management, so that "the intimate can be brought under public scrutiny" (5). Gaines dramatizes exactly that condition. In the world of the Hebert plantation, desire is never simply a matter of the personal. It is something to be observed, anticipated, and potentially criminalized. From this perspective, the novel's preoccupation with observation extends beyond Bonbon's overseeing of Marcus at work to spaces of the domestic and sexual, where power aims to police questions of who is allowed to desire whom and who can go home with

whom. According to Siobhan Somerville, “the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality . . . were deeply intertwined” (3). The novel reproduces this very dynamic through its depiction of interracial desire.

Louise’s early attraction to Marcus brings this aspect to light. From a distance, Jim sees that “she was looking at Marcus” and continues that “I could tell she was looking only at Marcus” (Gaines 51). The observation is short but very important. In the beginning, desire on the plantation is always accompanied by watching. And this kind of watchfulness is never innocent, as it immediately casts Marcus into the sphere of white women’s sexual attention and danger, as well as in the perception of the community. At the beginning, Marcus does not return that gaze, and Jim notes that he is “thinking about Pauline” (59), a detail that briefly displaces the expected script of interracial desire. Even so, Gaines has already established that the plantation watches not only labor, but attraction. The author also clearly states that this new form of erotic interest emerges within a certain sociocultural context. While Sun Brown sees Marcus knocking on Bonbon’s door late at night, he is surprised not only by the fact that someone is seeking out Bonbon, but that Louise comes out to the gate twice for the same man, something she has “never done” (105) before. In this passage, it can be seen how fast a personal matter can turn into a shared one. Marcus and Louise do not emerge initially as people visible to Bonbon. Rather, they emerge as people visible to the entire community, noticing changes in routine, voice, time, and body language. Here, surveillance is not only top-down. It is horizontal, dispersed, and social, and it is exactly this kind of everyday observation that makes interracial intimacy so difficult to stay covered.

Surveillance becomes more than just visual in the course of their relationship. Stoler’s revision of Michel Foucault helps us understand how: “The family . . . was not a haven from the sexualities of a dangerous outside world but the site of its production” (*Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* 153). The plantation household depicted by Gaines is precisely such a space, where desire is produced and overheard, where desire is heard and seen and interpreted and monitored. Aunt Margaret takes on particular significance because her story makes clear how the

maintenance of the plantation order requires more than visual surveillance; she witnesses Marcus “standing outside the fence, looking up at Louise’s bedroom window” and later overhears him in the very room (Gaines 129). Her cutting question – “How long, Miss Louise, ’fore you holler rape? How long?” (Gaines 143) – calls attention to the racial script that defines the roles of white women and black men. However, at stake is not just the matter of consent, which can be revoked under the plantation rules and custom. The policing of intimacy, of which Sciuto speaks, becomes an important aspect of Gaines’s plantation universe. The threat posed by Aunt Margaret’s warning lies precisely in the fact that it connects intimate knowledge and racial history, since Aunt Margaret is sure that her niece’s body, language, and accusation will outweigh Marcus’s truth. In this sense, the bedroom scene crystallizes the novel’s awareness that interracial sex in the plantation South is never interpreted on equal terms. Although Louise might feel passion towards Marcus, and vice versa, the relationship between the characters is situated in the realm of race, which can reprogram their desire into crime. While the threat involves not just exposure of what takes place, it includes an interpretive appropriation of the events. The lovers cannot control the interpretation of their own intimate relations because the plantation culture can name it however it wants. The question asked by Aunt Margaret is absolutely devastating in such a way that she hears not just sounds in the bedroom, but also the social script outside it.

Davis is able to illuminate the reasons for this surveillance in the following way. Speaking about the plantation quarters in Gaines’s work, Davis says that “intimacy and observation functioned together” (273). The point is that it is true in the case of this novel. There are no spaces on the plantation where intimacy occurs away from the gaze. It is an enclosed space; everyone sees and knows everything that is going on there. Margaret’s vigilance, Jim’s narrating, Marshall’s observations and the constant circulation of knowledge all prove the fact that the plantation is maintained not just by the gaze of the overseer, but also by the whole system of surveillance.

The relationship between Marcus and Louise should also be understood as a form of resistance on the part of both characters. For

Marcus, it represents an attempt to resist incarceration through intimacy. For Louise, it represents a form of resistance against the constraints of marriage, race, and plantation life. In her analysis of intimate relationships, Sciuto explains that love and attachments have the capacity to subvert preexisting “hierarchies” (21). Gaines creates a real-world version of that resistance. When Marcus tells Jim that Louise wants to leave and that “we go’n need help” (Gaines 158), the relationship is no longer merely erotic, but it becomes a plan to escape the racial and social order of the plantation itself. The history of Louisiana helps to contextualize the potential violence of that act. As explained by Ian Haney López, even though Louisiana was never a state that relied on statutory definition to determine who qualifies as black, the state Supreme Court created a standard of “appreciable mixture” for determining one’s race (83). Gaines’s novel preserves the social afterlife of that legal logic in a world where interracial desire threatens a racial order built on constant acts of reading, classification, and enforcement. Even if the plan is likely to fail, the attachment remains politically significant. Desire is not a subplot in the novel; it is one of the ways of expressing defiance. Yet, Gaines does not romanticize this act of defiance. The escape plan shows how precarious the act of resistance becomes when it moves from being a state of mind to an action. Marcus and Louise can think about escaping, but the South which they will have to traverse is structured specifically in order to make their escape impossible. This is why Aunt Margaret instantly sees the folly of their plan to leave the plantation because the idea “of a black man, a white woman, and a white child leaving the South” (Gaines 192) is too ridiculous to be taken seriously. The relationship, therefore, challenges the plantation order and law, but the novel at the same time insists on the cost of that challenge. In this manner, Gaines maintains both the subversive potential of intimacy and its historical violence. Love matters in the novel not merely because it transcends the plantation and its law, but because it tries, under conditions designed to destroy that attempt.

The final part of the novel broadens the community aspect of surveillance from the lovers to others as well. The moment when Jim reveals to his aunt that he is going away from the plantation becomes a marker of the larger social implications of the romance between Marcus

and Louise. Their relationship is not limited to being an intimate affair between two people. It changes the way other people think about remaining, leaving, remembering, and surviving. Jim's decision becomes significant because it implies that the power of the plantation is not limited to those who are physically controlled by it but also includes the observers whose task it is to choose whether or not to stay in that particular social system.

Opacity and Overt Resistance: Marcus Beyond Unreadability

Marcus resists through unreadability, but Gaines does not confine resistance to opacity alone. There is also, for example, an element of overt resistance. In this way, Marcus is not simply unreadable; he is also a character who refuses and speaks in ways that exceed the bounds of mere interpretive opacity. First and foremost, this is evidenced by Gaines's attention to his physical appearance and dress. For instance, in the fields, "He had on a short-sleeve green shirt and a pair of brown pants. He had on a pair of brown and white dress shoes" (Gaines 29). Despite the fact that Jim had offered him some work clothes, "He didn't pick up either one" (Gaines 30). This is not, it must be noted, an accidental matter of personal style but an act of active resistance through self-fashioning. Marcus does not want to look like a worker, and it is important that he does not because this is a matter of visual order. Thus, Marcus's rejection of the khaki pants offered to him by Jim becomes much more than an exercise in vanity. It is a refusal to let the plantation finish converting him into type. His green shirt and brown-and-white dress shoes do not free him from the field, but they prevent total absorption into its script. These clothes signify that the self cannot be reduced to mere punishment. In this respect, Marcus's choice of clothing becomes similar to his stare and silence.

Marcus's conversations with Jim make this resistance even clearer. In what is possibly one of the most important scenes in the novel, Marcus tells Jim that Marshall Hebert has offered help only "if I kill Bonbon for him" (Gaines 159). Marcus adamantly declines this offer, saying, "I ain't no dog, Jim. . . . I ain't no hunting dog to go round killing people for

nobody else” (Gaines 159). This is a refusal rather than any kind of ambiguity on his part. Marcus refuses to be complicit in the use of white power, even if this refusal puts him in the untenable position of being caught between the brutality of Bonbon and the manipulations of Marshall. Additionally, Marcus says, “I can’t stay here ten years, Jim. . . . I can’t even stay here ten weeks” (Gaines 160). In other words, his resistance involves not just an objection to Bonbon’s watch, but an objection to temporal punishment itself. He refuses to accept the plantation’s expectation that he endure custody as fate; in fact, “Maroon time is not simply delay; it is resistance that refuses the scheduling of white modernity” (Mahmoudi and Rezapoorian 103). Marcus’s impatience with plantation time and the fact that he will not stay “ten years” or even “ten weeks” speaks directly to that sort of resistance to an imposed temporality that is based on punishment, discipline, and racial management. The conversation that Marcus has with Jim complicates the moral universe of the book. Marcus is no innocent, and Gaines is no more interested in making him into one than he is in making Grant an idealist. Marcus is ruthless, selfish, self-protective, and frequently aggressive. Yet it is precisely Marcus as this non-idealized subject who resists the efforts made by Marshall to turn him into a weapon. “I ain’t no dog” is arguably one of the most politically powerful lines of the book because it refuses the transformation of black masculinity into a tool of white use. It is what Marshall demands that Marcus be – a disposable agent.

Opacity remains important, particularly in the hawk story, but it cannot carry the full weight of the argument on its own. When Bonbon takes down the hawk, “all of us were looking at the hawk except Marcus. Marcus was looking at Bonbon” (45). The importance of that point does not rest solely in the reversal. It rests in the way Marcus does not play his role as required by Bonbon. In that moment, Bonbon needs his performance of mastery watched, appreciated, and validated. But instead, Marcus watches Bonbon rather than the object before him. What makes Marcus’s opacity significant in the scene is precisely its withholding not of action but of comprehension. Gaines never tells us the meaning of the look that Marcus directs at Bonbon. Is the look one of disdain, judgment, apathy, or merely the hard truth of Bonbon’s neediness? The ambiguity is

crucial because Bonbon's power rests in his ability to comprehend and create a response. Marcus's stare frustrates this process. No plea for mercy, no admiration for the powerful, no submission – Marcus just stares, and the meaning behind his gaze remains elusive. This is why opacity can be such a threat in Gaines's narrative. It robs the overseer of interpretive control.

Marcus's rebellion is greater than mere unreadability in terms of form and effect. He rebels by how he dresses, how he refuses, how he moves slowly, how he speaks, and by the dangerous closeness that he shares with Louise. Even his attempt at escaping constitutes part of this broader strategy. In his portrayal of Marcus, Gaines has not presented him either as a straightforward rebellious hero or as an outright victim. Marcus is a subject who refuses to become wholly subsumed into the readability of the plantation. His unreadability is thus only one of many strategies employed. The attempt by Marcus to escape with Louise is not merely a continuation of the theme of his desire but the ultimate form of his refusal to stay where Marshall and Bonbon put him. Where the field scenes depict resistance as endurance, the escape scenes portray resistance as movement. Marcus is unable to conceive of resistance and freedom as exclusively internal and symbolic acts. He wants to escape. That desire for exit matters because it prevents us from romanticizing opacity into a complete politics on its own. Gaines celebrates Marcus's opaque nature, but he also demonstrates the inadequacy of opacity to negate the oppressive structures that imprison him. Resistance in *Of Love and Dust*, as such, involves both the inner and the outer worlds, both the refusal to be interpreted and the attempt to escape the oppressive situation.

Therefore, Marcus's resistance is complicated because of his involvement in the plan that Marshall hatches. As Marcus tries to resist becoming merely a dog, he finds himself enmeshed in a system that makes it possible for him to escape only if the other white man wants him to do so. It is not that Gaines portrays Marcus as someone who is outside the plantation system; rather, he is resisting something despite being trapped within a machine that controls, dominates, and manipulates. Marcus is engaged in his resistance in spite of the fact that he is in an environment where the choices have already been made for him.

Conclusion

Of Love and Dust does not reveal only the vulnerability of the white gaze but also a plantation economy where surveillance becomes visual, spatial, community, and personal. Reading the novel through the theoretical lenses proposed by Davis and Sciuto shows that Gaines's plantation is not just a site of labor but a form of carceral geography, where both looking and the regulation of desire take place. Marcus is incarcerated not only by jail time but by a plantation system that extends punishment into work, space, and social life. In turn, Bonbon, who is not a fully autonomous looker, relies on Marshall Hebert's power and is unstable beyond his community.

Marcus's act of resistance must be comprehended on more than one plane in ways that go beyond the idea of opacity. Marcus's mode of resistance is not just in the form of opacity but through his dressing in an unconventional manner, by subverting Marshall's expectations, by speaking back against being used as a weapon, and through the intimacy which challenges the plantation system. Louise's love for Marcus is a part of this act of resistance too, and Aunt Margaret's vigilance points out how close the plantation keeps track of the intimate lives of its inhabitants. Gaines thus shows that power does not merely want to see Black subjects. It wants to control how they toil, how they desire, how they move, and how they belong. The political significance of *Of Love and Dust* comes out of such multiple acts of resistance by Marcus. The novel does not offer resistance as triumph, purity, or easy legibility; rather, it involves being molded, exposed, and conflicted through a combination of compromised conditions, asymmetrical danger, and competing desires. Resistance exists through Marcus because he does not completely succumb to the system on the plantation. Bonbon does not inspire fear in the reader because he knows too much, but rather because he represents a community in which observation and eroticism are modes of punishment and menace. Resistance takes place through surveillance in Gaines' novel, revealing itself in its visual, social, and sexual dimensions and broadening our understanding of the operation of plantation power and African-American defiance.

Note:

¹ In addition to the published novel, I consulted the handwritten manuscript draft of *Of Love and Dust* held in the Ernest J. Gaines Papers, Ernest J. Gaines Center, Dupré Library, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and cross-checked several scenes and textual details discussed here.

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