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Molehills can be Mountains

During my first semester of freshman year, I was enrolled in LDR-101, a leadership exploration course that focuses on analyzing many forms of life-writing in order to answer the question: what is inclusive leadership? Through project-based learning and extensive reading, my peers and I were introduced to multifaceted approaches to leadership. As a class, we conducted research on historically underrepresented women, reflected on our perceptions of leadership, and documented our own experiences as leaders or witnesses of leadership. Previous to this class, my understanding of leadership was mostly concerned with the effects of environmental influence on communal progress in traditional leadership positions. However, my experience in LDR-101 this semester has introduced me to the diversity and potency of unconventional leadership when examined on an individual scale. Through studying texts such as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, by Ernest Gaines and a related essay, “Rethinking Definitions and Expectations: Civil Rights and Civil Rights Leadership in Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,” written by Robert Patterson, I discovered new aspects of intersectionality and individuality that serve the purpose of collective progression in communities.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman chronicles the life of Jane Pittman, a 110-year-old Black woman born and raised in Louisiana during slavery, through her narration of significant vignettes in her lifetime and observations of post-civil war Black communities and

Southern race relations. Gaines represents an incredibly impactful community whose influence often goes unrecognized—working-class Black women—through the book’s namesake. The main character of the book, the famed Miss Jane Pittman, is rarely at the forefront of the major civil rights movements and demonstrations that she describes in the novel. However, her influence over those monumental events and social changes is prominent whether her presence is direct or indirect. For example, through Jane’s relationship with Jimmy, the fated “One” to lead her community to true citizenship in 1960s Louisiana, Gaines illustrates how indispensable Jane and women akin to her position are in cultivating the motivations of “traditional” leaders.

Throughout the novel, her significance is majorly conveyed through subtext and development in background characters. However, during (arguably) the zenith of the novel, Gaines abandons subtlety and verbalizes the potency of Jane’s character: “‘You can help us now Miss Jane.’ Before I could say ‘how?’, that long head boy in them overalls said, ‘Your mere presence will bring forth multitudes’”(Gaines 242). Before that point, no character had acknowledged the potency of Jane Pittman’s presence nor her influence through direct dialogue. Generally, Gaines facilitated that narrative through implications and her relationships with powerful figures, but by including that conversation towards the conclusion of the book, the audience is forced to reflect on Jane’s character through a different perspective.

While I am familiar with many iterations of Black women leadership in books, Gaines’s characterization of Jane Pittman feels incredibly distinct because of her seemingly ordinary yet impactful motivations throughout the story. It was a vindicating and novel experience to read about such an influential character who does not adhere to the restrictions of the traditional leadership lens. Many characteristics of Jane Pittman reminded me of my great-grandmother and my grandfather, especially Jane’s supportive yet instrumental relationship with Ned. Though I

did not know my great-grandmother personally, I know she did not attend an American university but deeply valued education and encouraged all of her children to prioritize their education whether it be traditional or experiential. Her values compelled my grandfather not only to attend undergraduate school but to obtain his PhD and become the first Black professor at the University of Miami. The principles my great-grandmother held have echoed through my family tree: in my grandfather, my mother, my siblings, and myself. As a result, I believe that education, whether it is through an academic setting or life experience, is the highest form of leadership as continuing to indulge the mind and expose oneself to wisdom will benefit future generations.

One of the essays my LDR-101 class read in response to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was “Rethinking Definitions and Expectations: Civil Rights Leadership in Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,” by Robert Patterson. Through this essay, I was exposed to the concept of bridge leadership, which defines the ubiquitous, unrecognized acts of leadership that benefit communal evolution, in this context perpetuated by Black women. Patterson acknowledges Ernest Gaines’s portrayal of bridge leadership through the characterization of Jane Pittman as a representation of gender dynamics that challenges the established societal understanding of those actualizing social justice during the reconstruction era and the civil rights movement:

While attentive to how well-known Black men, including Frederick Douglass, Booker T Washington, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., have rightfully come to hold a central place in Black civil rights history, Gaines also examines not only how the untold stories of less-known people and more quotidian acts of enfranchisement contribute to successful civil rights gains, but also how integrating these examples into our conceptual framework

alters the paradigms through which we understand these vexed categories of leadership and civil rights (Patterson 342).

The phrase “quotidian acts of enfranchisement” in particular summates how Jane Pittman interacts with civil rights until the end of the novel, when she commits a more traditional act of resistance in homage to the characters she has nurtured throughout her life. These ubiquities that distinguish the identity of Jane Pittman in the novel are not represented as insignificant details through the lens of Gaines. In fact, they are crucial in progressing the narrative as a celebration of the unrecognized or unconsidered accomplishments of Black women leaders in American history. Jane Pittman is a pivotal depiction of “bridge leadership” articulated through fiction to honor these pillars of civil rights action who are consistently overlooked by history.

Reading *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and the related essay by Robert Patterson inspired deep reflection on my perception of leadership, specifically, the relationship between individual action and collective social progression. I have come to understand that personal motivations and small-scale initiatives can be equally as effective as drastic action in benefiting a community. My experiences in a leadership position on campus reflect this shift in values. This semester, I was given the opportunity to enact change on campus through our Student Government Association. Each council member is tasked with working on a resolution during a semester (or a full year depending on how laborious the process becomes) to benefit our student body. As freshmen officers, my class council expressed special interest in improving all appliances used in the freshman residential buildings. The goal was lofty, to say the least, but we believed that the only way to make a “real difference” was to accomplish such a massive project. However, following conversations with our senior director, executive board president, and fellow council members, we came to the conclusion that completing the original goal in five months

was unrealistic. We were encouraged to pursue a more concentrated project that benefits freshmen residential life rather than a widespread effort that would not be attainable within a semester or a year. At first, I believed that abandoning our initial goal would render my council ineffectual; I felt dejected. However, while discussing where to redirect our focus for the resolution, one of our officers noticed that the inspections on the elevators in freshmen housing had expired. This inspired our revised goal: to facilitate more frequent appliance inspections in the residential buildings to prevent future complications. Though this goal is significantly smaller than our previous resolution, it is extremely necessary in keeping all those who stay in first-year housing safe.

The previous standard to which I held myself that affected how I invoke leadership tended to subconsciously disregard the efforts and accomplishments of many underrepresented groups. What many consider as simple standards on an individual level, can inspire “multitudes” (Gaines 242). With an evolved consciousness, I hope to carry the testimonies of these communities in my writing and personal activism, whether through representation in fiction like Ernest Gaines, my work as a Student Government representative, or by continuing to educate myself on the complexities of individual contributions to social change.

Works Cited

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