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## ***People With Guns Speak First: Perspective, Authority, and Ownership in Ernest J. Gaines's A Gathering of Old Men***

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### Abstract

In the novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest J. Gaines offers the perspective of multiple generations, ages, and races to show how some have dealt with life post-civil rights movements and life post-slavery. Gaines uses the voices of multiple characters from different voices of the South, far from the Antebellum mindset, to give circumspection of how authority and ownership affect storytelling. Gaines takes this even further to include among his narrators representatives from an older generation of post-slavery African American men. Multiple narrators present elements of age, gender, race, and social standing that can be associated with their perspective of the events that take place in the story. Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* deals with lending the narration to voices of Southern oppression and misrepresentation. Through this essay, I examined the multi-perspective narrative model as a tool that the characters use to express their authority and views of ownership. From this narrative device, the narrators offer different layers of historical context that allude to their perception of their worldview. Through a multi-perspective narrative, Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* presents a juxtaposition of cultures, voice, and interpretation which offers perspectives that are not always given consideration while simultaneously opening up the question of a narrator's authority.

### People With Guns Speak First:

#### Perspective, Authority, and Ownership in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*

As humans have evolved as rational thinkers, so has humankind's ability to narrate the events that take place. History is teeming with stories that detail the human race's conquest of the world. Not all stories are sweet, as history is littered with tragedy, horror, and sorrow. No matter the type of story there is a narrator and a narrator must be given permission to speak. Our stories are success stories, survival tales, and victory epics. The beauty of stories is that they transcend truths and knowledge, but when storytelling is stifled and silenced, so is the voice of generations.

Long before written language, stories were passed down through constant retelling until those stories are passed down again to a new generation--otherwise known as oral tradition. While this idea of the heirlooming of stories is a nostalgic idea, there have been times in American culture where some have stifled the voices of certain races and social classes from telling their stories--particularly

the African American voice. Some have used their authority to take ownership of perception and narratives were used to promote racism, ignorance, and fear. Through the abolition of slaves, the slave narrative was accepted as literature and this narrative opened up a new perspective and voice for those who were not even allowed to learn to read or write.

In many ways, what is now known as the slave narrative opened up a new voice in storytelling. Finally, the oppressed could share their own stories and express the pain and torment that they endured. This new-found freedom opened up dialogue on the horrors of slavery that the African Americans had endured, but also shed light on how even their voices belonged to someone else. Expression was meant for those in authority, not for those who were owned. The slave narrative not only gave perspective of what is it like to be devalued as a human, but also what it is like to be silenced. William Andrews states, "The slave narrative after slavery was the most democratic literary genre adopted by African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (ix). The voices of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northrup, Harriet Ann Jacobs circulated for a number of years after the Civil War ended and eventually inspired other African Americans to stand up and tell their own stories--even made up ones.

Beginning around the 1830's and growing in popularity well into the early 1900's the antebellum slave narrative was common literature for reflection and truth and in some areas surpassed the sales of contemporary literature. African American Literature has grown into a genre of its own and the African American voice is now much more respected as an authority. Stories of this genre reflect on the post-slave narratives that focus on civil rights issues and how the current system is focusing on African American treatment. Sheila Nayar states in "The Enslaved Narrative: White Overseers and the Ambiguity of the Story-Told Self in Early African-American Autobiography" that "We tend as humans to write in the models that are familiar to us and to which we are exposed (and sometimes even indoctrinated), perhaps we should expect the early slave narratives to be spontaneously predisposed toward, or working through, or lodged in such forms of narrative expression" (202). The antebellum slave narratives were astounding for their time and, in some ways, it was inconceivable to their readers to fathom how slaves who were forbidden to read and write could be capable of penning their own stories. The overwhelming desire to understand the hardships of the slaves created in readers a hunger for raw, horrifying truth.

Stories are threaded together from one person's account to another. Perspectives weave in and out of attention and understanding may be convoluted. In some stories, there are multiple narrators who offer different opinions and interpretations. This idea of multiperspectivity, while common to our everyday lives, is revolutionary in narration. Such narration, called either the multiple person narrative or multiperspectivity, is defined by the *Living Handbook of Narratology* as "a basic aspect of narration or as a mode of storytelling in which multiple and often discrepant viewpoints are employed for the presentation and evaluation of a story and its story world" (Hartner). While this is rather common narrative tool, *A Gathering of Old Men* by Ernest J. Gaines uses multiple narrators in order to give freedom to usually silent characters to use their own rhetoric that relates to their experience. Lewis Tucker argues, "What results is a multi-vocal tale which centers on the storytelling in which the men engage, creating space from which they can lay the groundwork for a resistant, progressive black community" (115). With these narrators comes a glimpse into a world that is not yet spoken of--a world that has its own myths, folklore, diction, and history.

In the novel *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest J. Gaines offers the perspective of multiple generations, ages, and races to show how some have dealt with life post-civil movements and post-slavery. Gaines uses the voices of multiple characters from different voices of the South, far from the Antebellum mindset, to give circumspection of how authority and ownership affect storytelling. In *Re-(W)righting Black Male Subjectivity* Keith Clark states, "He transports his old men through a ceremonial expiation and exorcism in which they confront and claim responsibility for their subjugation. Specifically, the characters interrupt historic deformity through the stories they tell, and the mutual confessions inaugurate their re-formation-their unification and atonement for the sins of self-erasure" (200). The old men in *A Gathering of Old Men* must stand in solidarity in order to maintain their authority and ownership of their stories, perspectives, and legacy.

Not only does an author take risk when presenting a multi-perspective narration, but there is a risk when they give the authority to a voice who is not likely to be heard. Gaines takes this even further to include among his narrators representatives from an older generation of post-slavery African American men. Among the risks of multiple narrators are the elements of age, gender, race, and social standing. Characters also carry baggage with them that affect the manner in which they tell a story. Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* deals with lending the narration to voices of Southern oppression and misrepresentation. Through this essay, I will examine the multi-perspective

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narrative model as a tool for how the characters express their authority and views of ownership. From this narrative device, the narrators offer different layers of historical context that allude to their perception of their worldview. Through multiple narrators these stories gather the voices of lower class, uneducated, and frustrated minority groups and fuse them with those of a higher class, educated, and privileged. Through a multi-perspective narrative, Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* presents a juxtaposition of cultures, voice, and interpretation which offers perspectives that are not always considered while simultaneously opening up the question of a narrator's authority.

Stories are not always told by the person who is affected by the action of the plot however, and throughout history, stories have been told by those who are respected. When considering narrators, it is worth considering their environments and how their race or social class is traditionally treated in those environments. *A Gathering of Old Men* is set in rural Louisiana during the late 1970's where slavery and the remnants of racism still lurk in the swamps and haunt the houses on the edges of the cane fields. Gaines's characters dwell in a rural community outcaste from the rest of the community--both geographically and socially. The action of the novel revolves around the killing of Cajun cane farmer Beau Bouton, the son of Fix Bouton, in the front yard of an older African American man named Mathu. Candy Marshall, the owner of the land, conspires a plot in order to protect Mathu and calls for all of the older African American men in Marshall Quarters and surrounding areas to post up and wait for Fix to avenge Beau's death. Each man is told to bring a shotgun with empty shells and to come with the intention to claim that they killed Beau. The men stand to take back ownership over their history in rebellion against a lifetime of standing down in the face of oppression.

While reading *A Gathering of Old Men* the reader is introduced to a new character with every chapter and the narrator's authority feels as if it is their job was to report. Each narrator has a role in the story other than narration. Lou Dimes is a familiar narrator throughout the chapter since he is first on the scene and stays with the men until the ending chapter of the book. Narrators such as Snookum, Janey, and Miss Merle provide scenic and cultural context and the narrator Sully gives a completely outside perception on the Bouton family. The narrative style of *A Gathering of Old Men* relies heavily on storytelling and the manner in which the chapters are divided tell a story all its own. Each storyteller offers their own personal interpretation of the events that take place, whose experience, nostalgia, and an agenda must be understood as idiosyncratic. From the perspective of innocence in Snookum, to apologetic ignorance of Sully, to the voice of experience in Cherry and Rufe,

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a full circumspection of the events of the day that Beau Bouton was shot is present. Told as though the story is derived from the oral tradition, the reader engages with one narrator at a time until they are handed off to another narrator. Of all the narrators, the chapters that are told from the old men's perspective provide reflection of their own cultural norms and experiences—both horrid and nostalgic in nature. These chapters feature flashbacks as well as comments from the narrator. In a novel that is dedicated to a group that has been treated unfairly for decades, this sense of freedom in narration is vital.

The beginning sequences of the story are narrated by the youngest and most naïve character, George Eliot Jr. or Snookum. Since he is the introductory narrator, Snookum does not know the context of the situation at hand, he only knows its importance and his role in the events that will take place. Snookum is inexperienced, but he represents the future generation of Marshall Quarters. He is present in most of the scenes once the old men gather and he takes more action in the confrontation than any of the other children. Unlike the old men and Candy, Snookum has little to no authority and owns nothing but his own imagination.

The novel could have begun with any narrator, but begins with a young boy, concerned with getting caught with girls in bushes and with the taste of turnips. Snookum's narration begins slowly much like the rhythm of his snarky, slow southern diction. And much like everything in the south, everything is slow until something bad happens. From Snookum's limited point of view, he gives a description of the setting and the introduction to our main characters. His narration introduces Candy, Beau, and Miss Merle. Snookum is often asked to do favors and receives pralines for a reward. Snookum describes most of the inhabitants of Marshall "Old and tired-looking" (Gaines 7). Through his actions—such as spanking his own bottom as he runs--his youthfulness and innocence shines as a contrast in later chapters to the old men's oldness and experience. Even Snookum, with his immaturity, can see that the old men are tired but due to his innocence, he does not understand why they are tired.

Similar to Snookum, not all narrators speak from the same experience as the old men and some of the main characters are not given chapters at all. Lou Dimes, a reporter from Baton Rouge, is given four out of the twenty chapters of the book, while Candy is given none. Because of the lack of perspective from Candy's side of the story, her side is told mostly by the other narrators that have their own opinions about Candy. Candy becomes less than transparent and she is most interpreted by

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Lou--the leading narrator. In one of the earliest drafts of the novel, Gaines chose Lou as the narrator of the entire story which could allude to why Lou is the leading narrator of the novel in the final draft. Because of this early draft, Lou remains the narrator with the most authority since he narrates the most.

Lou's voice in the novel is analytical and he no real personal tie to the conflict other than his relationship with Candy. While Lou does seem to be a trustworthy man, he has no personal ties with the people of Marshall other than his relationship to Candy. Lou Dimes is an outsider to the situation but is not completely naïve of the culture of Marshall. In his first paragraph, Lou alludes that he is familiar with the people. He knows that only the elderly and children live there, and he is especially aware of how the people of Marshall feel about Beau Boutan. He states in his first line of his first of many chapters, "Now what I was trying to figure out was who in Marshall Quarters could—not would—kill Beau Boutan" (Gaines 58). In his chapters, Lou becomes connected to the people and their frustrations with the traditional treatment of African Americans in Louisiana, though until the day of the story, it has not affected him much.

Lou cannot take ownership of the emotions that the old men present because he lacks the connection to the past that the old men have lived. Lou can never understand the hardships and prejudice that the old men have endured, but he does understand their hatred towards Beau and Fix. Lou mentions as he drives into Marshall Quarters how, "The doors and windows of the few old houses were open, but no one stood in the yard or worked the gardens...Knowing the past reputation of Beau's family, I figured that was the smartest thing to do" (Gaines 59). Even though Lou is not a part of Marshall, he is aware of the backwards mentality that the Bouton family has and is aware of the injustice and fear that the people of Marshall face. Lou gives a non-biased and fair perspective of the situation at hand. Lou becomes a vital part of serving as a mediator between Candy, the old men, and Mapes since he has an outsider's authority of handling a situation without bias.

Lou not only receives narrative authority in the novel, but he also is given literal authority during the shootout between Luke Will's gang and the old men. During Snookum's second chapter, he witnesses Mapes designate Lou as the man in charge. Mapes, sitting on the ground and rocking back and forth, says to Lou, "You're in charge. Raise your right hand. You do swear—" (Gaines 201). Mapes requests that Lou not disturb him anymore and leaves Lou to handle the problem whether he wants to

or not. Lou continues to try to stop the fighting, but neither side follows instruction. This wasn't Lou's fight to stop.

On the opposite spectrum, Candy Marshall does not receive any narrative authority. Gaines did not give Candy Marshall a chapter of her own and while this choice of omitting her from the narrators is understandable, it certainly presents interesting conflicts. Candy is the organizer of the gathering. Candy's motives in protecting Mathu and the rest of the older men in the Marshall Quarter are muddled in the translation of the multiple old men narrators.

Candy's orchestration of the gathering begins with her using her authority to tell Snookum what to do. The rising action begins when Snookum is called from eating turnips with his siblings to run an important errand for Candy. Snookum's grandmother did not even have a say in the matter. Candy demanded and she received. "I jumped down on the ground where she was, and she grabbed me by the shoulders with both hands. She leaned over brought her face close to mine, and her eyes, the color of blue smoke, looked wild and scared. I was thinking I had done something wrong and she was mad at me for doing it" (Gaines 5). The story relies on Candy's orders and Snookum's obedience. Snookum has a respectful fear of Candy, much like the rest of the residents of Marshall. Snookum refuses to follow the orders of his grandmother to eat his turnips but runs around town to do what Candy told him to do. Snookum and Candy's relationship is much like the old men's relationship to Fix. While Candy is progressively attempting to alleviate the history of how the men were treated, she simultaneously contradicts herself.

The people of Marshall Quarter are not only familiar with Candy, but in some way rely on her to "protect them"; or rather Candy believes that they do. Candy is not an antagonist in the story, but as the story begins to settle, the true independence is not entirely the men's independence from Fix, but their independence from Candy. Candy has a personal relationship to slave-owning through her own family line. She states, "Nobody is a slave here...I'm protecting them like I've always protected them. Like my people have always protected them. Ask them" (Gaines 174). Candy takes ownership not only over the land and the people on it, but she takes ownership of taking care of them by claiming her family always has whether that is true or not. Candy represents a maternalistic, benevolent racism—one that causes her to claim that she is there to protect "her people" and that the quarter is "her land" when neither the people or the land truly need her protection.

Candy inhibits the old men from advancing and taking their own authority by protecting them and not allowing them to make their own decisions. Mapes even makes the comment to her in Rooster's chapter when the men exclude Candy from their meeting. After Candy threatens the men, "You listen to him now and you won't even have this" (Gaines 174) referring to the land owned by her family. Mapes refers to Candy as "the savior" sarcastically, inferring that the men do not need a savior, especially not one like Candy. Through the old men's rebellion against Candy and their stories and confessions, Gaines does something magical:

He transports his old men through a ceremonial expiation and exorcism in which they confront and claim responsibility for their subjugation. Specifically, the characters interrupt historic deformity through the stories they tell, and the mutual confessions inaugurate their re-formation-their unification and atonement for the sins of self-erasure. (Clark 200)

When Candy's authority is not involved, the men are the ones who feel the most pride and power. When the men conference inside of Mathu's house after Candy leaves he says, "I been changed. Not by that white man's God. I don't believe in that white man's God. I been changed by y'all. Rooster, Clabber, Dirty Red, Coot—you changed this hardhearted old man" (Gaines 182). Mathu was not changed by Candy, but by the men who not only know, but feel his struggle and are an active part of the history of Marshall. Candy has no authority of how the men feel or what the men do, despite how much she believes she has. Candy is not an evil character and her intentions are not impure, though they may be biased. She loves Mathu and wants to protect him because of their strong bond. However, Candy automatically assumes that Mathu did the crime and wanted to protect him first and foremost, rather than all of the old men or even the person who actually committed the crime. Candy does love and respect Mathu, which is why she ultimately decides to leave. The old men's freedom and justice cannot be granted by Candy, no matter how much authority she has.

Most of the narrators help spread light onto the old men's perspectives and one of the best narrators is Grant Bello or "Cherry." Cherry's chapter takes place as the men around town meet up at the graveyard before they head to Marshall. This chapter anchors irreplaceable details of why the men choose to participate in the gathering. During the pivotal graveyard scene, Cherry gives major details regarding their complicated pasts and their ancestral relationship to the land itself, "the very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people's people had worked since the time of slavery" (Gaines 43). He describes the physical environment, focusing primarily on the cane fields, the



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weeds surrounding the unmarked tombstones, and the sunken Louisiana landscape. Cherry represents the men's ownership to the land itself. They worked this land and then they are buried on the land. The landscape that once felt like theirs, while they did not physically own it, was left up to chance of survival against the ever-changing world. While passing an empty cane field, he states,

It made me feel lonely. In my old age, specially in grinding, when I saw an empty cane field it always made me feel lonely. The rows looked so naked and gray and lonely—like an old house where people have moved from. Where good friends have moved from, leaving the house empty and bare, with nothing but ghosts now to keep it company. (Gaines 43)

Cherry's comparison to the cane field as an empty house stands as a metaphor for the old men and their loss of a sense of purpose. "Gaines presents the possibility of the land as affirming, as a marker of legacy for everyone in the South, and as a receptive witness and recorder to the stories that might construct an inclusive and accurate southern mythos" (Tucker 117). They have become obsolete, and much like an old, dilapidated house, they are of no use anymore—which gives them all the more reason to reclaim their purposes and take ownership of their actions now. Cherry gives the opportunity to see past the main conflict of the gathering and connect to the deep-rooted conflict that festers within the old men. He grants the privilege of feeling their sense of longing for more time to make a bigger difference when they had the chance.

Within Cherry's chapter is the graveyard scene in which the men gather before they arrive at Marshall. The graveyard is surrounded by the remnants of their past plowed away by the Cajun farmers who now lease the land. The men maintain "an understanding that these old houses and cane fields tell no story to those who are removed from their history, the maintenance of the gravesites is a necessary act in the preservation of ancestry" (Wardi 39). In this section of his chapter, Cherry tells stories that relate to the old men and their families—mostly their dead families. He tells that they graveyard is old, run down and that "that old graveyard had been the burial ground for black folks ever since the time of slavery" (Gaines 44). Besides describing the physical landscape of the dilapidated cemetery, he describes how the land makes the men feel. Most of the men feel a deep connection to the place. In that moment of their standoff it is their responsibility to spend time reflecting on where they have come from and where they will end up.

Thomas Vincent Sullivan, nicknamed Sully or T.V., provides the perspective of the observer. Through his eyes, the perception of authority that the Cajuns feel becomes clear. Sully narrates the

story when Fix and his younger son and LSU football star, Gil, interact with one another. Sully himself provides a different take on the attitudes regarding race than the other narrators. His narration illustrates the contrast between old southern traditions based in racist ideas in Fix and the new southern viewpoint of a future of civil peace in Gil.

When Sully first arrives to the Bayou Mitchel and Fix's home, he describes a different type of setting than expected. Sully not only describes the landscape, but how Gil interacts with the people of Bayou Mitchel. Sully states, "Gil loved all the people back here, and they all loved him, white and black. He would shake a black man's hand as soon as he would a white man's, and the blacks would beam with pride when he did" (Gaines 132). In his first chapter, Sully is concerned when Gil is short with Cal and about how his peers treat others. Sully is an observer of Gil's behavior. Gil is deeply respected and has an authority in the bayou and this authority is on display when he speaks to Fix about the death of Beau.

*A Gathering of Old Men* is a story about transformation and while this is present with the contrast of the old men, it is most represented in Sully's chapter. The Bouton family is represented in a negative way for the first eleven chapters of the novel. They are the representation of power and oppression towards the novel's heroes, but what Sully, an outsider, describes in his chapter is a slightly different family. The intimidating Boutons are grief-stricken when Gil, Sully, and Russ enter the house. All huddled up in a room, the men sit silently, mourning the loss of family, and the most intimidating man in the quarters is "sitting in a soft chair by the window, and the little boy was in his lap...He squinted up at Gil when we came into the room, and you could see that he had been crying" (Gaines 133-134). This first description of Fix joined with the words soft represents his role of father; however, Sully's second description of Fix defines him as the protector: "Fix was a short man with a big head, broad shoulders, thick chest, and big hands. He had practically no neck at all, and his big head set on his shoulders the way a volleyball sits on a bench" (Gaines 133-134). It is through Sully's eyes that the mysterious man is revealed. Sully gives the detailed account of Fix as a person of emotions and authority, rather than the brutish man of malice that is originally described.

Throughout Sully's chapter, Fix undergoes a transformation by using his authority to subdue those who wish to act upon the murder at Marshall for reasons other than preserving the family. Gil reports to Fix what he heard and saw at Marshall, "I saw something over there Papa--something you, I, none of us in this room has ever seen before. A bunch of old black men with shotguns, Papa. Old

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men, your age, Parrain's age, Monsieur Auguste's age, all with shotguns, Papa. Waiting for you" (Gaines 136). Fix replies with a derogatory term and his body language changes. Through his reaction, Fix is destined to act upon the threat--to make an example out of the old men and silence their protest. To Fix, a family man and protector, the old men's invitation is a slap in the face of the death of his son. They represent disrespect to his mourning, his culture, and his people. Gil knows this and continues to describe the scene, "Old men, Papa. Cataracts. Hardly any teeth. Arthritic. Old men. Old black men, Papa. Who have been hurt. Who wait--not for you, Papa--what you're supposed to represent" (Gaines 137). Gil attempts to use his authority of witnessing the scene to persuade his father not to act. The reiteration of "Old men, Papa" and the correlation to the old black men to members of Fix's family help Gil push the argument that Fix should simply let them be. Gil recognizes that this is an old stand off--this represents Fix's action while Fix was Gil's age and that retaliation from Fix would simply continue the battle for Gil's generation.

Gil does not want to take ownership of his family's history, but rather wants to dispel of it. Sully's interpretation of the conversation describes Gil as a hero. Since Sully's perspective of Gil is a biased one, it could be interpreted that Gil is more concerned with his football career and not the race issues that are present in the Deep South. Gil expresses to Fix that people treat him differently because of his family's reputation:

All my life I have heard what my family have done to others. I hear it today--from the blacks, from the whites. I hear it from the opponents even when we play in another town. Don't tackle me too hard, because they would have to answer to the rest of the Boutons. It hurts me to hear that, Papa. It hurts me in here. He said, hitting his chest. 'It hurts me because I know it's not true. (Gaines 137)

Gil is not primarily concerned with what his family has done, but rather is concerned with his perspective of the situation. Action in the dispute at Marshall would result in hurting his reputation as an "All American at LSU." Gil's fate relies on his family taking ownership of their own actions to promote the best welfare of the family. To Gil, this would be staying out of trouble so that he can play football without prejudice from other players and scorn from the media.

However, Gil does show a concern for his teammate, Cal, the Pepper to his Salt. "The first time ever, black and white, in the Deep South. I can't make it without Cal, Papa... I depend on him, Papa, every moment I'm on the field (Gaines 138). Gil takes ownership of anything his family would do or

could do and knows that a confrontation such as the one the old men are inviting Fix to in Marshall, would not only ruin his football career, but his relationship and partnership with Cal, his better half on the field.

When Fix asks if playing football along with African Americans is worth it to forsake his brother's honor he replies, "Luke Will's days are over with, Papa. Luke Will's days are passed. Gone forever" (Gaines 143). Gil is referring to another prominent voice in the room, Luke Will, a friend of Beau's. Throughout the chapter, Sully notes that Luke Will consistently interrupts the conversation between Gil and Fix and gives his opinion. Fix consistently silences Luke Will stating that Luke Will is not a member of the family. Luke Will, described by Sully as "one of those big, hulking beer-belly red-necks" (Gaines 141) is vocal about his opinions of the confrontation. He consistently shoves his way into the family conversation stating that "They're wasting time" and there is a power struggle between Fix and Luke Will toward the end of the chapter.

Luke Will is a representation of what Fix used to be known as: a vigilante who took matters in his own hands with no respect of the law. Fix, older and in a new time, is unsure of how to proceed. Fix states, "Twenty years ago I would not have asked questions. I would have been at Marshall by now" (Gaines 142) to preserve his authority in the community, but also his authority in his family. Each man and woman in the room looks to Fix for what to do and when he is unsure, other strong voices such as Luke Will believe they have the authority to impede their own opinions. Fix and Luke Will are different in their intentions, however, since Luke Will is only interesting in starting trouble and causing harm to a group of people he is prejudice against. Fix states, "I'm not interested in your war, Luke Will...I'm interested only in my family. If the majority feels that their brother is not worth it, then the family has spoken. I'm only interested in my family" (Gaines 145). Fix is only concerned with defending his family and while he does not agree with Luke Will's intentions, there is still an implication that Fix wishes to act. Fix denounces Gil for his stance on the matter and sends him away from the house, not because Gil wants his family and the people at Marshall to get along, but because Gil's stance rebukes Fix's authority to stand up for his family even stating that Gil has killed him in this act of defiance.

Joseph Seaberry's (Rufe's) chapter contains multiple speeches from the old men. One of the most memorable is Tucker's story of the tractor race. Tucker tells the old men, Lou, Mapes, and Candy

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the story of the time that his brother, Silas, challenged Felix Bouton to a race—his two mules against Felix’s tractor. Silas won the race against the machine and was beaten for his victory. Tucker states,

I saw my brother win that race. But he wasn’t supposed to win, he was supposed to lose...and they beat him, and they beat him. And I didn’t do nothing but stand there and watch them beat my brother down to the ground. (Gaines 97)

Tucker’s story presents another reason why the old men stand on Mathu’s porch at Marshall. For their entire lives, they backed down in fear and held their tongues in solitude. At this stage in their lives, they feel it is time for them to take ownership of what they have not done in the past: stand up for themselves. Tucker especially takes ownership for his inaction, “Out of fear of a little pain to my own body, I beat my own brother with a stalk of cane as much as the white folks did” (Gaines 98). Tucker understands that he wasted time not standing up for his brother and the other men regret not taking action in other horrendous situations. Rufe’s chapter allows the men to reconcile with their inaction and replace it with action.

In each testimony during Rufe’s chapter, there is mention of the land, the agriculture, and the men’s place in the working system of the quarter. Rufe’s chapter also alludes to the men’s perspective of the land. Similar to Cherry, Rufe interprets the events taking place at Marshall as the men standoff with Sheriff Mapes. Rufe illustrates part of the frustration that the old men have. Each time a man stands up, he states why he “killed Beau” and their reason connects to avenging the honor of a family member who was beaten or killed. Rufe’s chapter is one of the moments where the solidarity of the old men is strong. Each man agrees with the other in order to push the agenda. Even when Mapes asks Mathu to make the men plead innocent, Mathu states, “I can’t make nobody say what they don’t want to say” and “A man got to do what he think is right, Sheriff” (Gaines 85). Through Rufe’s perspective, this chapter takes on the tone of ownership. The men each choose to be there and can choose when to leave. The only problem for Mapes is that they won’t leave and they won’t give up. In “Strong Men Getting Stronger: Gaines’s Defense of the Elderly Black Male in *A Gathering of Old Men*” Shannon states,

The collaboration among the old black men of *A Gathering* seems to point to a culmination of Gaines’s quest to fuse black consciousness with black solidarity. He appears to suggest that success at effecting change is inseparably bound with discovering the challenging reappraisal of old black men. (197)

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This bond between the men's perspectives of their experiences is present most in the chapters narrated by the old men, especially Rufe's.

The old men use their protest to regain the authority that they lost of their own land and culture. The men have a pastoral view of the landscape of Marshall. In a way, the landscape is a metaphor for their own deterioration. The quarter is now dry and dusty but it used to be teeming with life and vegetation. Rufe observes Johnny Paul as he talks about the land that Mapes cannot "see." According to Johnny Paul, Mapes couldn't see the land at its prime—when the old men's neighbors were still alive. "Everybody had flowers in the yard... That's why I kilt him, that's why...To protect them little flowers. But they ain't here no more. And how come? Cause Jack ain't here no more. He back there under them trees with all the rest" (Gaines 91). Rufe's chapter exposes a deeper meaning behind the protest. Not only do the men stand in opposition to Fix, but they also stand in opposition to being the last of their community. The old men remember how Marshall was when they were young—when they did not take ownership of the land themselves.

Johnny Paul's speech takes up the bulk of Rufe's chapter and within his speech lies his attitude towards modernization and preservation. From the old men's perspective, the land of Marshall has sentimental value—both nostalgic and horrifying. To some men, the land is where they suffered, but for others like Johnny Paul, it is where they feel the most attacked. Johnny Paul makes reference to the weeds on the edge of the property and the graves back in the graveyard. He reminds the men of the flowers and the people who planted them who are now "Under them trees back there... just waiting for the tractor to come plow them up" (Gaines 92). Johnny Paul is concerned about the preservation of the people of Marshall at the expense of advancement. He states,

I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules---like they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. (Gaines 92)

Johnny Paul is afraid that the legacy of the people of Marshall will be erased by the Cajun farmers and by claiming he killed Beau, he intends to proclaim that his people cannot be erased: "I'm the last one left" (Gaines 92). Johnny Paul's speech gives him ownership of the situation to preserve his and the other old men's legacy and history.

In the end, it is young and scared Charlie who preserves the legacy of the old men. During Antoine Christophe or Dirty Red's chapter, Charlie takes his final stand against the Cajuns. "Charlie was smoking the cigarette, smoking it hard, like he had to hurry up and finish with it. Then I saw him getting up. I whispered to him to get back down, but Charlie wasn't listening to anybody. He was headed straight toward the tractor" (Gaines 209). Charlie knew that he would not make it by the end of the night after he shot Beau and spent the day hiding in the swamps. He spent time out in the land that he worked in all his life—the land that held him captive to Beau Bouton. Charlie's death was not only a sacrifice but his way of atoning for what he did. Charlie's ownership of the death of Beau Bouton did not take away the courage of the old men's protest, but rather enhanced their mission. When all was over, Charlie was buried in the graveyard in Marshall that would have been plowed away if he had not taken a stand.

*A Gathering of Old Men* presents a story of self-realization and transformation. Ernest Gaines said in an interview, "I read books and read books and when I didn't find me or my own people in those books it was then that I tried to write." What is so unique about this novel is that Gaines not only sets up his narrators to tell a story, but also to collaborate with one another. Each narrator compliments the next and the contrast between the diction of each presents a harmony of voices. *A Gathering of Old Men* gives each narrator authority to take ownership of the story itself with their involvement in the plot.

In the words of the author himself, "Words mean nothing. Action is the only thing. Doing. That's the only thing." The characters of *A Gathering of Old Men* not only narrate, but act throughout the novel. Their action through narration is what gives the novel its raw poignancy. Each narrator is given a place in the story and they not only give details, but they are the details. Each name and corresponding nick name, each dialect and accent, each viewpoint gives the plot something special. Stories are the ultimate acts of doing and multi-perspective narration only enhances the experience.

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