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# Voicing manhood : masculinity and dialogue in Ernest J. Gaines's "The sky is gray," "Three men," and A Gathering of old men

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Voicing Manhood: Masculinity and Dialogue  
in Ernest J. Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," "Three Men," and  
*A Gathering of Old Men*

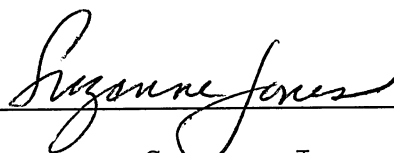
William Thomas Mallon

Master of Arts, University of Richmond, 1996

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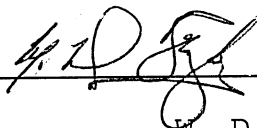
Using concepts both from gender studies of literature and from discourse theory, this thesis explores the relationship between race, masculinity, and dialogue in Ernest Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," "Three Men," and *A Gathering of Old Men*. In these works, Gaines demonstrates that manhood can be achieved by a process of linguistic appropriation. His African-American male characters become men through the utterance, not the violent act. This thesis examines how Gaines's black men appropriate language among distinct groups: themselves, the extended black community, and the white community.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.



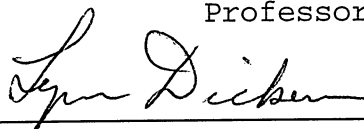
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VOICING MANHOOD:  
MASCULINITY AND DIALOGUE  
IN ERNEST J. GAINES'S  
"THE SKY IS GRAY,"  
"THREE MEN,"  
AND A GATHERING OF OLD MEN

By  
WILLIAM THOMAS MALLON  
B.A., University of Richmond, 1991

A Thesis  
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This paper is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Mary Ann Mallon, who was the world's best teacher.

[A men's studies approach to American literature] seeks to understand how culturally defined ideals of manhood have shaped the lives of men, frequently limiting their growth or frustrating their basic needs. (Riemer 298)

There comes a time in one's life. . .when dignity demands that you act. . . . This is the kind of manhood that I try to show in my work. (Gaines qtd. in Lowe 242)

Ernest Gaines writes of a southern society in which every attempt has been made to deny black men a sense of masculinity. He writes of a world where black men oftentimes are unable to provide for their families, to realize fair treatment under the law, even to name themselves as "mister" instead of "boy." Gaines also writes of an American society in which the "single most evident marker of manhood" is "violence" (Kimmel 132). In his fiction, Gaines subverts the traditions of black masculinity in the South and hegemonic masculinity in America. His characters establish a new paradigm in which they earn a sense of masculinity through dialogue. Recent criticism on masculinity in Gaines's fiction has focused on his latest novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*;<sup>1</sup> these essays use *A Lesson* to investigate the ways in which Gaines establishes new masculine definitions for black men in

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip Auger's "A Lesson About Manhood: Appropriating 'The Word' in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*." *Southern Literary Journal* XXVII, 2 (Spring 1995): 74-85; and Suzanne Jones's "Reconstructing Manhood: Race, Masculinity, and Narrative Closure in Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* and *A Lesson Before Dying*." *masculinities* 3, 2 (Summer 1995): 43-66.

the South. Equal discussion needs to be given to his earlier works in which Gaines contemplates ideas of race, masculinity, and dialogue. In selected stories from *Bloodline* and in *A Gathering of Old Men*, it can be argued that the men in these stories earn a sense of manhood primarily through linguistic appropriation. The men's central vehicle for proving their masculinity is language, not violence; the utterance, not the physical act. To prove how Gaines's African-American men create a masculine community earned by linguistic power, I will focus on their dialogues with their own communities, the white community, and each other. These dialogues powerfully deconstruct the southern racial codes governing black masculinity, and construct a new paradigm of power for African-American men in the South.

Language is not passive. It is a commodity that regulates the encounters between members of society. It can be owned, bartered, and stolen. In "Discourse on the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin describes the process by which language can be seized and made one's own by a speaker:

The word of language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to the moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language. . . , but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it own's own. (293-94)



This process of appropriation of "the word of language" is difficult if not impossible if the society in which one lives maintains heavy social restrictions on public dialogue. For black men in the South, making the word "one's own" has been, indeed, a long, hard struggle encompassing nearly 400 years of oppression. In the South prior to the Civil Rights Movement, race-based social codes used language to emasculate African-American men. Language existed in white people's mouths, in oppressive contexts, serving to maintain discriminatory racial categories. Dialogue between blacks and whites was a white-constructed, white-dominated, and white-enforced creation.

Southern social codes emasculated African-American men through language in two ways: first, black males were denied the social recognition of manhood and, second, the range of permissible black-white conversations was greatly limited, thereby constricting African-Americans' linguistic freedom. These codes are documented in a variety of historical, biographical, and sociological sources. For example, in a 1945 sociological study of "Caste, Economy, and Violence" in the South, Allison Davis notes how "whites in the area must not shake hands with Negroes or address them as 'Mr.,' 'Miss,' or 'Mrs.'" They address all Negroes either as 'girl' or 'boy' or by their first names. On the other hand, Negroes must ad-

dress all whites honorifically." (10) In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright is almost beaten for failing to use the appellation "Mr." while addressing a white man: "I would have been pleading guilty to the worst insult that a Negro can offer to a southern white man" (166).<sup>2</sup> Blacks in the South also were not permitted a full range of dialogue with whites. In *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*, Neil McMillen notes how some subjects were "simply too sensitive for interracial discourse" (25). Richard Wright confirms that claim: "among the topics that southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes" included white women, the Civil War, or "any topic calling for positive self-assertion on the part of the Negro" (202).

Blacks had limited options in reacting to these codes. They could accept them and act deferentially to whites as was expected of them; or they could reject the codes. Rejection of racial codes took two forms: escape from the southern community in hopes of finding equality and power elsewhere, or death at the hands of whites who refused to accommodate

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<sup>2</sup> Not only did the restrictions on social title limit linguistic freedom for blacks, they also caused negative psychological repercussions. See James Farmer's autobiography, *Lay Bare My Heart* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), in which Farmer states, "I was deeply troubled by my father's accommodation to a system that made him less than a man" (65).

the unwelcomed and inappropriate interracial dialogue.<sup>3</sup> From this historical context where whites control black-white dialogues, Ernest Gaines conceives fictional worlds in which African-American men redefine the social structure by appropriating language as their own. "The Sky is Gray," "Three Men," and *A Gathering of Old Men* address to varying degrees the way in which black male characters succeed in "adapting [language] to [their] own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin 293), and in doing so, prove their masculinity to black and white communities alike.

In "The Sky is Gray," Gaines illustrates the way in which "the word" in the South, left to white men's control, silences and represses black dialogue. Once his African-American characters have claimed language for their own intentions, Gaines demonstrates how dialogue constructs, limits, or liberates the black experience. The college student in this story deconstructs the traditional southern black experience by attacking the very essence of its existence: language. "The Sky is Gray" is significant to my discussion because it provides a framework for Gaines's vision of the role of language in the construction of south-

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<sup>3</sup> The power that language had in establishing and maintaining racial codes should not be underestimated. In 1934, a white mob beat to death 70 year-old Henry Bedford, a black tenant farmer, for *speaking* disrespectfully to his landlord (McMillen 29).

ern society. Gaines suggests a social system in which language is a powerful source (if not the ultimate determinant) in defining social reality.

In "The Sky is Gray," two black characters are created in opposition to each other. The preacher is a symbol of (perhaps unwitting) black deference to a racist, oppressive society. He assumes the role as spiritual guide for the black community and, in that role, voices his opinion unsolicited. In dominant society, the preacher has confidence to speak authoritatively to other blacks because his authority is granted by white society. When a group of blacks is assembled in a dentist office waiting room, one of the women wonders "why the Lord let a child like that suffer" at the hands of a incompetent dentist; the preacher retorts, "Not us to question" (94). Ironically, the preacher muzzles. He encourages blacks to accept their oppressed role in society as God-given, curtailing their ability to conceive a culture of equality between the races. Conversely, the college student challenges the preacher's intention of dialogue by encouraging the group to question, to speak, to engage in discussion: "That's the trouble with the black people in this country today. . . . We don't question is exactly our problem" (95). He reforms the preacher's definition of the black role in society from one of silence and acceptance to

one of articulation and rebellion.

In the dispute between these two men, Gaines provides clues to the manner in which he will subvert traditional definitions of masculinity. When the young man doubts the existence of God, asserting "you believe in God because a white man told you to believe in God" (97), the preacher responds by twice striking the boy in the face. Here, Gaines allies violence with silence: the preacher, who encourages his flock to remain silent and deferential, is associated with an inability to enforce his beliefs beyond the fist. Significantly, the young man does not retaliate with his own violence. Instead, his response is verbal: "That hasn't changed anything" (98). By not returning the punches, the young man re-situates the physical (and traditionally masculine) altercation into a linguistic battle, a war of words, not fists.

The victory is the young man's. Incapable of effectively responding to the young man's challenge, the preacher leaves. Later, the young man attempts to demonstrate to the others in the room how their world is shaped by social construction:

"You don't know [the grass] is green," the boy says. "You believe it's green because someone told you it was green. If someone had told you it was black you'd believe it was black." (100).

Gaines clearly posits language not only as the force underpinning black acceptance of the defined roles in the South but also as the fundamental essence of human experience. As Bakhtin delineates and as the young man confirms, once Gaines's African-Americans initiate the process of linguistic appropriation, they have the ability to conceive a universe where wind really is pink, where social codes are surmountable and conquerable, to some degree at least, by attaining linguistic control and power. The dentist waiting room scene in "The Sky is Gray" provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how Gaines contextualizes social issues through dialogue and language.

"Three Men" applies the theoretical orientation of language discussed in "The Sky is Gray" to the concept of traditional and subversive definitions of masculinity. In this story, Procter Lewis first exhibits traits associated with stereotypical southern black manhood. When Procter encounters a "taken" woman in a bar, his strong sexual urges cloud his thinking ("I could see how them two warm, brown things was waiting for someone to tear that dress open" [129]), which leads to a dispute over the women. The two men turn to violence and Procter accidentally stabs the other man. He turns himself in to the law not because of guilt over committing a crime but so that a white man will rescue

him: he "was hoping Roger Medlow [the plantation owner] would get me off like he had done once before" (132). At the police station, he demonstrates conventional deferential racial etiquette towards the white police officers. However, when Procter is put in a cell with Munford Bazille, a repeat offender of physical assault, and Hattie Brown, a homosexual prostitute, Munford acts as Procter's conscience, encouraging him to discard conventional means of demonstrating masculinity:

Face don't make a man--black or white. Face don't make a man and fucking don't make him and fighting don't make him--neither killing. None of this prove you a man. 'Cause animals can fuck, can kill, can fight. (138)

Clearly, Munford rejects masculinity of dominant culture, which Michael Kimmel defines as "white, middle class, early middle-aged, [and] heterosexual" (124) and whose "most evident marker" is "violence" (132). Rather, Munford encourages Procter to prove his masculinity by asserting independence and self-determination, even if it means losing physical freedom and with it the ability to demonstrate traditional masculine acts like sexual conquest and violence. Linguistic freedom, Munford argues, is more important in determining manhood: "So you don't go to the pen for killing a nigger, you go for yourself. . . . You go saying, '. . . For once in my life I will be a man'" (141). Munford encourages Procter to become a man by verbalizing manhood ("You go *by saying.*")

He deconstructs traditional paths to masculinity (namely violence, which, ironically, Munford himself is unable to escape) and re-situates Procter's manhood in the linguistic realm.

After Munford is released, Procter initially rejects the older man's advice and embraces traditional markers of manhood. Procter links his sense of masculinity to sexuality and physical prowess: "Look at me. Strong. A man. A damn good man. A hard dick--a pile of muscles" (144). But later, he concludes that Munford is right: "I knowed I was going to the pen now. I knowed I was going. . . . Even if Medlow came to get me, I wasn't leaving with him" (152). Once Procter conjoins manhood with self-determination, he escapes the barriers erected by traditional masculinity. He cries; he attempts to comfort the young boy who has been confined to his cell; he forms a prayer community with the boy and, despite his assertion that he doesn't believe in God, he wants to gain the residual effects: "That's the only way I'll be able to take those beatings--with you praying" (153).

Procter does not subvert hegemonic masculinity as much as other Gainesian characters do. Procter does cry, but he does so secretly, without noise, his face buried in a pillow. He attempts to comfort the boy but at times bullies him as well; Hattie's ability to console is far superior. He is



repulsed by Hattie, whose effeminate characteristics and actions are freakish to him. Procter remains unsure whether he will speak his intentions and assert his will; the story ends on an ambiguous note: "I don't know. . . . I'll just have to wait and see" (155). Nevertheless, through Munford's encouragement to profess his masculinity through dialogue rather than violence, and through Procter's attempt to forge a masculine community with the young boy, "Three Men" makes progress in redefining the traditional paths to manhood.<sup>4</sup>

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines further explores the college student's deconstruction of social barriers through language and Munford's definition of non-traditional paths to masculinity. Gaines's men take command of language in three contexts: at home with wives, at the plantation amongst themselves, and with white people. As they appropriate "the word," they achieve a sense of masculinity, so when violence does occur, it is not the means to masculinity but the result of it.

Gaines's men first take command of "the word" at home.

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<sup>4</sup> While somewhat tangential to my discussion, it is worth noting that Gaines suggests alternatives to hegemonic masculinity in Munford and Hattie themselves, neither of whom is traditional in his sexual orientation. As Herman Beavers discusses, "Gaines avoids the creation of fixed categories [of masculinity] here, choosing instead to create looser, more fluid ones" (234). Hattie's alternative lifestyle, while loathsome to Procter, seems to teach him about nurturing, empathy, and compassion.

Sandra Shannon states that the men's actions are perceived by their wives "as a farce" (204). Rather than farcical, Matthew Lincoln Brown's encounter with his wife is the first evocation of the manner in which Gaines uses dialogue to break expected masculine behavior. Before Mat and Chimley decide to join the other men at Mathu's house, Mat is confronted by his wife. Unable to exert his masculinity in white society, he asserts dominance over the only person he can possibly control in his world: his wife.

"Matthew, I'm talking to you," she said. "Hunting what?"

"I'll tell you when I get back," I said.

"You telling me 'fore you leave from here," she said.

"Go somewhere and sit down, woman," I said. "This men business."

"I'm making it my business," she said, coming up to me. "Hunting what?"

"Get out of my face, woman," I said. "For once in my life 'fore I die, I'm go'n—" I stopped. "Just don't be asking me no questions," I said. (36)

In this exchange, Mat uses some of the same techniques that white society imposes on him to silence and intimidate his wife. He refuses to engage her in conversation; he marginalizes her involvement by excluding her because of gender ("this men business") in the same way he is excluded in many experiences because of his skin color; he demeans and objectifies her by calling her "woman" rather than her full name (Ella); and he cuts off dialogue and prevents his wife

from sharing in an equality of knowledge. Gaines makes this encounter different by subverting the expectation of silence. Instead of ending the conversation with Mat's refusal to speak on equal terms with his wife, Mat publicly shares the feelings of frustration, rage, anger, and humiliation that were previously left unspoken between them:

. . . you still don't know what's the matter with me? The years I done stood out on that front garry and cussed at God, the years I done stood out on that front garry and cussed at the world, the time I done come home drunk and beat you for no reason at all--and woman, you still don't know what's the matter with me? . . . .

I stopped now and looked at her. I could feel the hot tears running down my face. I pressed my lips, I could feel my mouth trembling, but the tears kept on running down my face. It had been a long time since I had talked to her like this. A longer time since she had seen me crying. I didn't turn my head. I didn't wipe my face. I just stood there looking at her. (38).

While acknowledging the conditioned reaction for a black male in southern society--Mat reminds his wife of "cussing" in solitude and taking out his frustrations by violently abusing her because he is unable to speak and act equally in white society--Gaines redefines the possibilities for Mat's response. Now Mat speaks of his frustrations with all the emotional intensity that is warranted. He cries in front of his wife. A sense of self-assurance permits him to confront her directly, without turning away, proud of his tears of anger and sorrow. The verbal and non-verbal messages he sends Ella suggest new opportunities for oppressed men in

their relationships with their wives. Mat acknowledges emotional vulnerability through speaking of negative experiences without fear or embarrassment and by demonstrating his emotions through non-verbal communication like tears, trembling lips, and direct stares. Mat's confrontation with his wife demonstrates one way that these men embrace masculinity, and significantly, it requires that Mat act in non-traditional masculine ways. By using language to expose his vulnerability, pain, and anger, Mat gains confidence through self-disclosure and engagement in dialogue about topics traditionally off-limits for men: failure, fear, and pain.

In the next stage of the novel, the old men gather at Mathu's house on Marshall plantation. The men's gathering serves two purposes. First, it creates a distinct community of storytellers among people who had been afraid of the consequences of their voices. Dialogue creates a powerful linguistic community. Secondly, the group also forms a coterie of linguistic Otherness. The black men realize that their voices are different from the words of whites and their difference can be used for powerful purposes.<sup>5</sup> Language

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<sup>5</sup> I have extrapolated on an idea from Barbara Johnson, who states in *A World of Differance* "the sexes stand in relation to each other not as two distinct entities but as two foreign languages" (37). Her ideas of the role of language in gender differences can also be applied to the role of language in differences between black and white men.

forges new masculine possibilities for the black men in their dialogues with each other and in their interactions with the whites who are present at the plantation.

The men's dialogue amongst themselves creates an environment where the men find strength in each other's voices. Indeed, *A Gathering* is a story of men taking power by congregating. I use "congregate" deliberately because, in its religious connotation, congregate is not simply gathering, but a coming together and *sharing* of a common experience or belief. It implies community through verbal interaction, which the men achieve when they begin to share their stories with one another. By publicly acknowledging their guilt over silence and inaction in the past, they free themselves to make empowering decisions in the present. This public congregation begins when many of the men visit an old neglected graveyard on the way to Mathu's house and, while there, attend to graves of relatives who died as a direct or indirect result of white oppression and black deference. Jacob, for instance, visits his sister's grave "to make up for what he had done to his sister over thirty years ago" (45). In the "Rufe" section, the men continue to poignantly atone for past inaction and silence. For example, in speaking out for the first time, Tucker atones for his silence at the time of his brother's death and, simultaneously, publicly assigns the

guilt of these incidents to those really responsible: the Cajun farmers who beat Silas to death and the white law enforcement officials who refused to prosecute. Tucker undergoes four steps when speaking out: first, he identifies his guilt-related feelings: "Y'all don't know 'cause y'all wasn't there, and I ain't been able to talk about it before. . . . Been in here all these years, boiling in me. . . . Done spoil my intrance. Fear. Fear" (96). Secondly, the character admits his role in the incident: "They beat [Silas] and they beat him. And I didn't do nothing but stand there and watch them beat my brother down to the ground" (97). Thirdly, Tucker seeks atonement and forgiveness. In this case, Tucker actually calls out to his brother, "Forgive me! . . . Forgive this nothing. . . Can you hear me, Silas?" (97). This calling out serves as a cathartic experience that counteracts the painful effects of silence: "In my fear, I went along with the white folks. Out of fear of a little pain to my own body, I beat my brother with a stalk of cane as much as the white folks did" (98). Finally, the character is forgiven by his peers: "He wanted us to pass judgment over him for what he had done. Us judge him? How could any of us judge him? Who hadn't done the same thing, sometime or another" (98). By listening to Tucker's story, by sharing in his pain and grief, even the men who don't actually speak

their own stories of silence and inaction are able to compensate for them by empathizing with and granting forgiveness to those who do. This is a process of group reconciliation. The elderly men also gain confidence in their voices by publicly atoning for past silence. Control and power over their voices breeds power over their environment and eventually control over Mapes's and other whites' voices and actions, too.

Once the men are assembled and have formed a congregation of courage and power, they move to defiantly reject white society's power over their lives. They achieve independence and power not through physical means but through voice and dialogue. In these instances, they dismiss the societal codes that govern how they are able to speak, and in finding their voices they prove their masculinity because their dialogue is on their own terms. For instance, when Mapes asks Mathu to force one of the men to acknowledge he wasn't Beau's killer, Mathu responds, "I can't make nobody say what they don't want to say" (85). Mathu bestows upon the men a freedom of dialogue. Rather than following the speech codes of the South--speaking when spoken to and remaining silent otherwise--the men can be self-empowering because of Mathu's decree. No one, especially Mapes, can make the men speak when they don't want to. The men inter-

rupt and repeatedly defy Mapes as well. The sheriff becomes angered when Dirty Red cuts him off:

"You trying to cut in on me when I'm talking to you?" Mapes asked [Dirty Red.]

"Look like he's doing more than just trying," Johnny Paul said, from the other side of Mapes.

. . . "You, too, Johnny Paul?" he said.

Johnny Paul nodded his head. "Me too." (87)

Johnny Paul rejects Mapes's instructions, defying the white power source that has controlled their lives for so long:

"All right," Mapes said. "Tell me. But make it quick. I can still get in some fishing."

[Johnny Paul said,] ". . .I don't have to make nothing quick. I can take all the time in the world I want, and it ain't nothing you can do but take me to jail. You can't slap me hard enough to hurt me no more, Sheriff." (89)

At this moment, Johnny Paul's dialogue is more powerful than the threat and history of Mapes's violent actions. Johnny Paul becomes the appropriator of the dialogue, enabling him to wrest power from Mapes. By having linguistic control over the conversation ("I don't have to...;" "I can take...;" "it ain't nothing you can do...;" and "You can't..."), Johnny Paul also has control over the relationship.

The precedence of linguistic control over physical power also is demonstrated in the scene with Uncle Billy and Mapes. Despite Mapes's beating (he punches Uncle Billy in the face twice), the old man maintains his story, claiming "I kilt him" repeatedly. Mapes grows angrier and angrier when violence doesn't produce the results he wants: "he did not like



what he was doing, but he didn't know any other way of getting it" (69). Meanwhile, Uncle Billy looks at Mapes and grins; he seems "as proud of his swollen lips as was Crane's boy in *The Red Badge of Courage*" (77). Billy's swollen lips are like battle wounds, proud evidence that the word is mightier than the fist. While Mapes's beating only leads to his exasperation, Billy's speaking leads to power, pride, dignity, and self-worth.

In addition to using acts of speech like interruption and repetition to subvert southern speech codes, the men extend to outright reversal of these codes. Once the elderly black men are in command of the situation at Mathu's house, they exert the same prohibitions on whites that previously were enforced on them. When the deputy Griffin becomes belligerent, Mapes tries to remove him from the setting:

"Take a walk," Mapes said.  
 "I don't feel like walking," the deputy said.  
 "Then just be quiet," Mapes said. "Let them work out their gall. You was saying?" he said to Tucker.  
 "That boy through?" Tucker asked Mapes.  
 "He's through," Mapes said.  
 "You through, boy?" Tucker asked the deputy himself.  
 That little deputy didn't answer. (95)

Tucker reverses the history of race relations in the South by first referring to and then directly addressing the deputy as "boy." Tucker shows that the black men are no longer afraid of the language codes of the South. Tucker uses words freely

just as white men always have. He allies himself with traditional white manhood by *naming* someone as inferior. Here, language orders a hierarchy of power, and Tucker, through his word choices, clearly and confidently casts himself as superior. The deputy defers to Tucker by not answering him, confirming the powerful role that Tucker has over him. Griffin is rendered speechless and powerless by the black men.

Finally, the transformation of power from whites to blacks is made complete when Mapes refuses to speak during the gun fight between the old men and Luke Will and his cronies. Mapes deputizes Lou Dimes, responding "just leave me alone" (201). The white law enforcement official has been silenced for good and withdraws on his own volition, finally acknowledging that the black men are in control of their own lives. Gaines does not provide the reader with a clearly defined turning point in Mapes's acceptance of the black men's initiative, but his regard for the men is ultimately tied to their voices. Mapes respects Mathu because he "never backed down from anybody" (84). Conversely, throughout most of the novel, Mapes patronizes the other black men's actions because he "didn't think much of the rest of us and he didn't respect us. . . . To [Mapes] Mathu was a real man. The rest of us wasn't" (84). Mapes seems to change his point of view

late in the novel when Clatoo refuses to listen to Candy. Candy has appointed herself as the men's (especially Mathu's) protector, just as her family "protected" the plantation's black inhabitants in years past. However, Clatoo tells Candy "we don't want you there this time" (173), removing her from their lives just as they have done with Mapes and Griffin. It is at this moment that Mapes realizes that the men have found their voices. Prior to this moment, Mapes regarded the men's talk as "work[ing] out their gall" (95) and as "tall tales" (107). But when one of the black men stands up to Candy, the symbol of white paternalism, Mapes is convinced that their motivation is real. He responds to Candy: "they want to talk, they'll talk" (174), suggesting no one--especially white people--can silence their voices.

While most of the elderly black men find power and dignity in speaking out against Mapes and Candy, the gathering is not unanimous in its desire to appropriate "the word." Reverend Jameson remains firmly entrenched in the deferential behavior that whites expect from blacks. He knows his voice and, initially, is confident when the other men are still insecure. He quickly tells the newly assembled crowd that they are wrong in their demonstration: "Y'all will sing a different tune before this day is over with. . . . Just mark *my word*" (54). (Emphasis added.) Unlike the other men,

however, his "word" is not really his. It is the word of paternalism, which encourages black deference and silence. Just as the men have rejected Mapes's threats, so, too, do they ignore Jameson's. While the other men stand strong in their convictions, Jameson is described as "pathetic, bald, weary-looking. . . the only one there who seemed frightened" (61). The preacher is the only black man to be silenced by Mapes, falling to the ground when the sheriff strikes him. Gaines clearly links silence to violence, voice to victory on several levels: symbolically, the voiceless black man is the only deferential black man; lexically, the preacher is described with non-masculine adjectives like "pathetic," "afraid," and "little." Jameson remains emasculated in both word and action, the antithesis of his now-powerful peers.

In addition to dialogue forming a community of masculine power among the African-American men, it also creates a distinct dichotomy between blacks and whites. The elderly black men use dialogue to marginalize whites' importance in their lives. Once white culture is no longer significant to them, the men can define their existence on their own terms, gaining power and strength from their own community, their own actions, and their own people. They gain strength from

the *difference* that separates them from white society.<sup>6</sup> Johnny Paul reminds the gathering of African-American men, women, and children that, while many of their people and possessions on the plantation no longer exist in the physical sense, the remaining shared memories are an important source of communal strength. The blacks recall the people and their stories when Johnny Paul piques their memories:

"Y'all do remember, don't y'all? . . . Remember the palm-of-Christians in Thread's yard, Glo?"  
 . . . Glo nodded again, not looking at him. She was seeing the palm-of-Christians. I was seeing the palm-of-Christians. (91)

On the other hand, Mapes is excluded from this story of community, from these collective memories: Johnny Paul concludes, "That's something you can't see, Sheriff, 'cause you never could see it" (92). In this moment of remembrance, only the blacks can share in its poignancy and significance because the white sheriff is not privy to their experiences. They have marginalized Mapes, cast him out of their dialogue, and created a society whose language serves their own intentions, not whites' interpretation of events. In contrast to the eloquence of the men's stories, Mapes's response to these

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault defines this process of linguistic otherness as "fellowship of discourse" (225). By forming a black linguistic community, the men gain power in their difference. In this fellowship of discourse, according to Foucault, dialogue "circulate[s] within a closed community. . . [with those not] in possession being dispossessed by this very distribution" (225).

events is the inarticulate noise of an animal: "Mapes grunted. Not loud. Quiet. He was starting to feel what was going on. If he felt it right, he knowed he had to wait" (93). Once removed as the locus of power, Mapes loses his voice of authority and becomes incapacitated to offer a response beyond that of an animal.

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, most of the masculine power the men achieve is granted by the African-American community. Once the men begin to control their language and their environment, they gain confidence in their masculine identities. But their sense of masculinity is not only cultivated from within, from internal sources. The men's power is enhanced when whites begin to acknowledge earnestly and honestly the blacks' intentions. The black men demand the dismissal of language differences, and the whites oblige. This process for the men is not an easy one. Early in the novel, Mat explains how Chimley is affected by the ability (or in this case, inability) to name himself:

He didn't mind his friends calling him Chimley, 'cause he knowed we didn't mean nothing. But he sure didn't like the white folks calling him Chimley. He was always telling them that his daddy had named him Robert Louis Stevenson Banks, not Chimley. But all they did was laugh at him, and they went on calling him Chimley anyhow. (40)

As Valerie Babb notes, "those outside his world who refuse to honor his existence as a man employ [his nickname] in a

manner that implies degradation" (116). The act of naming, once "a brand of enslavement" (Benston 163), remains a way by which whites control blacks through language. In this case, whites using the name "Chimley" imply both disrespect for his heritage and refusal to provide linguistic equality. By the end of the novel, though, the black men have re-situated the social structure so that whites willingly agree both to the process of black self-naming and to the idea of an equality of language between blacks and whites. For instance, when Charlie returns to claim responsibility for his actions, he agrees to tell Mapes his story. First, though,

he stopped, because something else had suddenly popped in his mind. "Sheriff, I'm a man," he said to Mapes. "And just like I call you Sheriff, I think I ought to have a handle, too--like Mister. Mr. Biggs." (187)

This request subverts the history of southern black masculinity where such an appellation was an impossibility. Equally as significant, Gaines goes further in deconstructing southern black and white language differences by having the white sheriff--the epitome of white power--agree with the request:

"Sure," Mapes said, nodding, "At this point, anything you say. . . Mr. Biggs. That goes for the rest of y'all around here," Mapes said to us. He was serious, too; he wasn't winking. (187-88)

*A Gathering of Old Men* is successful in redefining racial codes governing black masculinity in the South, then, not only because black men engage in a dialogue of equality, but

also because the whites who previously have denied equality for so long willingly and honestly engage in an equality of dialogue--conversation intent on breaking down stereotypes and fostering better, symbiotic relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Critics are in disagreement over the significance of the gun fight at the end of the novel in determining Gaines's definition of black masculinity. In "Rereading American Literature from a Men's Studies Perspective," James Riemer argues that, through their gathering, the men "have proven their manhood to themselves" (292); he suggests that the violent fight is, in essence, inconsequential in the development of the new definition of masculinity. In "Reconstructing Manhood," Suzanne Jones counters that "the manly behavior that the old black men are eager to exhibit comes in part from their capacity for violence and from a desire for revenge" (52). Does the men's violence undermine the redefinition of masculinity they have achieved through dialogue?

Clearly, the author doesn't think so. Originally titled *The Revenge of the Old Men*, the book's title was changed, according to Gaines, because "the book is not about revenge.

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<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Gil Boutan and the professor in Tee Jack's bar also are intent on engaging in an equality of dialogue--not with the black men per se, but with their respective circle of white listeners. Gil is successful; the professor is not. Gaines obviously wants to show that this open, honest type of dialogue needs to occur not only in black/white conversations but also in same-race encounters as well.



There was no revenge intended. The book is about gathering and standing together for a cause" (Wilson 118). When asked about the difference in endings between his novel and the film version, in which there is no gun fight, Gaines replied, "I don't know if there's any difference at all. I think what I was trying to do in that entire book was show a group of men standing" (Gaudet and Wooton 97). Gaines attributes the inclusion of the fight to literary convention: "They brought guns, and I still believe in the old Chekovian idea that if the gun is over the mantel at the beginning of the play, the gun must go off by the time the curtain comes down" (Gaudet and Wooton 97). When asked if "all the shooting and killing [is] a sign of manhood over cowardice," Gaines replied, "Oh no, never was, because the old men couldn't see anything. . . . I just wanted those old men to stand one day" (Lowe 170). Gaines's intention and the actual events in the novel, however, do not necessarily coincide.

So intent on revenge are they, in fact, that several of the men are disappointed to learn that Fix isn't coming to the plantation. Rooster says, "We had cranked usself up for a fight, and we wanted usself a fight" (170). When Clatoo argues that the men should return home once Mathu turns himself in, Rooster acknowledges his desire for revenge:

. . . this was the day we was go'n get even. But now here Clatoo was saying we ought to go back home. Go

back home and do what? I hadn't even fired a shot. Just one, in that pecan tree, so I could have a empty shell. No, that wasn't enough. Not after what I had put up with all these years. I wanted me a fight, even if I had to get killed. (180)

At this point, although the men are able to overcome their emotional emasculation solely through dialogue, violence still seems necessary for the men to "feel" manly. In *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*, David Rosen states that "heroes, and men in general, rarely attain rewards of glory or hoped-for transcendent self-realization sufficient to compensate their pain" (219). Similarly, Michael Kimmel points out a paradox in men's lives, "a paradox in which men have virtually all the power [which the black men do have at this point in the novel] and yet do not feel powerful" (135). Applied to Rooster's situation, Rosen's and Kimmel's hypotheses suggest the "reward for glory"--the men's linguistic power and freedom--doesn't satiate: Rooster still wants violence. This need for violence concurs with the traditional masculine expectation in society; Bob Connell notes that "in contemporary Western society, hegemonic masculinity is strongly associated with aggressiveness and the capacity for violence" (180). If Rooster and the other men are left with the desire to fight, despite suggestions that verbal and non-verbal language have established a sense of dignity, self-esteem, and manhood, then Gaines ultimately has failed in

achieving a new masculine definition in *A Gathering*. To dismiss *A Gathering* as a failure at this very point, however, would be premature because Rooster continues in his personal growth after he reveals his feelings of revenge. Although Rooster (and presumably the others) reject Clatoo's plea for a non-violent ending, they are ready to listen to Mathu, who speaks the same message that Clatoo does: "Clatoo is right, I want y'all to go home" (182). Because Mathu has always been considered a "real" man by the rest, his recognition of the other men's newly found masculinity is most important:

Till a few minutes ago, I felt the same way that man out there feel about y'all--you never would 'mount to anything. But I was wrong. And he's still wrong. 'Cause he ain't go'n ever face the fact. But now I know. And I thank y'all. And I look up to you. Every man in here. And this the proudest day of my life.  
(181)

Rooster's transformation is noticeable. His feelings change from vengeance caused by his lingering sense of emasculation to pride in speaking against the social limitations of race: "No, [Mathu] wasn't the proudest man in this house. I was" (182). Once Charlie returns and Mapes confers a sincere appellation of manhood on him, he, too, can dismiss the men as successful: "Now y'all go on home. For a bunch of old men, y'all did all right today. Now go on home" (193). In the next moment, the men agree. Revenge and violence are not necessary for achieving manhood: Coot says, "We was go'n walk

[Charlie] to the car, we was go'n all shake his hand, we was go'n watch the car leave, and then we was go'n all go home" (194). Up to and through this sentence Gaines is true to his intention and redefinition of black masculinity. Violence is not necessary for manhood. Gaines rejects hegemonic masculinity and conceives a new concept of manhood based on shared dialogue.

Gaines, however, doesn't end the novel with this sentence. Like the characters he has created, Gaines has succumbed to Kimmel's idea of the "paradox in men's lives." Once he has developed a new masculine paradigm not reliant on violence and aggression, Gaines fails to notice the powerful masculine narrative he has before him. Drawn to the power of literary convention and by the facade of traditional masculine endings, Gaines allows guns to go off. He virtually admits to succumbing to such a paradox when he says, "I don't know that my ending was the best ending" (Gaudet and Wooton 97). Suzanne Jones is correct in saying that "the ending of the novel sends an ambivalent message about violence" (56). While the reader cannot ignore the gun fight as an important part of the novel, however, the violence does not establish a sense of masculinity for these men nearly as much as their dialogues with wives, selves, and white people. Indeed, unless the men went through the steps of achieving a mascu-

line community of dialogue and an equality of dialogue with whites, their violence never would have been possible. Unless they learned to stand up for themselves through their speech acts, they would have been dispersed a long time before Luke Will arrived. Violence is not a means by which the men achieve manhood; rather, the gun fight is a result of having already achieved it.

Gaines reestablishes the preeminence of language in this southern black masculine narrative during the final scene in the courtroom. Here, the judge bars guns from the men's lives, effectively removing violence from their realm of possibilities. The sentencing reaffirms what the reader already knows from the incidents at the plantation prior to the fight: for these men, masculinity is gained when they speak with pride, dignity, and self-assertion to their wives, their communities, the whites, and themselves.

Gaines continues his tradition of forging a new masculine narrative in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Other critics have discussed the issues of how Gaines dispels traditional masculinity in this novel;<sup>8</sup> I have no intention of repeating their cogent arguments. What is evident through this paper, however, is that the establishment of a new masculine paradigm is not new territory for Gaines in *A Lesson Before Dying*. In

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<sup>8</sup> See references in note 1.

the masculine narratives of "The Sky is Grey," "Three Men," and *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines dismisses the myths of traditional manhood for southern African-American men by giving his characters their voices. Those of us who hear their stories are grateful.

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