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Calling, Naming, and Coming of Age in Ernest Gaines's "A Gathering of Old Men"

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Abstract

In his 1983 novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines deploys characters' names so as to point to their implications in a society in which social stratification based on color and race is the norm. He draws his readers' attention to the importance of names by the headings he uses for the novel's monological divisions. The gathering that this novel celebrates, a sign of the old men's maturing, features, among other indications of coming of age, their insistence on being called by their formal names.

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The gathering depicted in Ernest Gaines's most recently published novel, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), is one of several old black men summoned by a young white woman, Candy Marshall, to prevent the lynching or imprisonment of Mathu, another old black man, who has helped to raise her after the death of her parents in a car accident. The novel is set on an October Friday afternoon and evening during the late 1970s in the fictional St. Raphael's parish in Louisiana, and earlier in the day the Cajun Beau Boutan has been murdered, Candy assumes, by Mathu, who now sits on the gallery of his shack, gun in hand, not far from the murdered man's corpse. Knowing that Boutan's murder will be attributed to Mathu—indeed, things seem to point in that direction—Candy has devised a way of protecting her foster father: she will shoulder the blame for the crime herself, and she will gather together as many old men as can be found who have an axe to grind against Boutan and have them stand with twelve-gauge shotguns containing empty number five shells, each man ready to proclaim his killing of the Cajun. The men respond to Candy's summons; in fact, they are ready to use live ammunition if necessary to protect their friend and make a stand again past oppressions. The successful stand they make challenges in an extreme way the established authority. As Carl Wooton, speaking of *A Gathering of Old Men* in an interview with Gaines, puts it: " ... the good that occurs happens through the individuals who are willing to go against the system. There does seem

to be a premise that men and women are capable of the courage to do what they ought to do, in spite of the system" (Gaudet and Wooton 22).

Events that ensue are not entirely as drastic as the above-mentioned scenario might suggest. Although two younger men are killed in the gun-fight that erupts in Mathu's yard that evening, the old men escape unscathed. Their response to Candy's summons has resulted in no tragedy to themselves, although they have had to bear the tensions of the long afternoon, and the taunts—some, even the blows—of the brutish sheriff, Mapes. The old men's stand is, none the less, real and convincing, and is the major manifestation—though not the only significant one—of the theme of personal growth, of passage from uncertainty and fear to self-assurance and responsibility, that dominates the novel. In the articulation of this theme, Gaines is heavily reliant on the deployment of personal names (the names by which people are named, the names by which they are called by their familiars) especially as these names occur in a society where white supremacy has been the status quo and where inroads are being made into long-held notions of superiority and subservience.

Gaines signals the importance of names in his novel by the headings he attaches to its units. In the manner of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Gaines structures *A Gathering of Old Men* as a series of monologues spoken in the first person, each identified by the name of its speaker. However, Gaines extends Faulkner's method by using a more complete name, i.e., by giving the Christian and family names, as well as the less formal names by which the speakers are known. For example, the first monologue, spoken by a black child, is headed "George Eliot, Jr aka Snookum"; the fourth, by one of the old men of the book's title, is called "Robert Louis Stevenson Banks aka Chimley"; the eighth, by a white newspaperman, is entitled "Louis Alfred Dimoulin aka Lou Dimes." In all, there are fifteen speakers, who deliver a total of twenty monologues. Nine of the monologues are by whites; eleven by blacks, including eight by various of the old men. All monologue headings use the same general structure: the formal name, the acronym *aka*, the familiar name.

Such a reiterated pattern invites, initially, general considerations about the relative significance of formal and informal names. The formal name provides one's identity in society and in law and is the name inscribed in the documents of the state; it is usually constituted of one or more given names and a family name. Conventionally, the family name, or surname, establishes one's rootedness in a family that goes back in time, that has a history. But in the history of black Americans, family names present a special case. Of the pre-Abolition period the historian John C. Inscoe writes: "Surnames for slaves were by no means uncommon, but neither

were they by any means universal. The extent to which slaves took second names [i.e., family names] is difficult to determine because of their reluctance to use them openly and their owners' refusal to acknowledge them, if indeed they were aware of them." Emancipation was marked by "the [freedmen's] sudden clamor for surnames. ... It reflected their eagerness to demonstrate their new status and affirm the dignity and self-esteem that accompanied their newly acquired independence" (547–48).[2] The given name or names (whether they be the names of saints, ancestors, national heroes, sports or entertainment celebrities) set one's identity as an individual person within that family. The informal name, the name by which one is called by those in whose company one spends his time (parents, siblings, friends, acquaintances, neighbors) has, normally, no legal status and is usually not written. Informal names may be altered forms of either given or family names, or nicknames, names not based on the owner's formal name but derived from some other source. Informal names usually bespeak endearment, fellowship, camaraderie, even when they (especially nicknames) might in themselves sound a pejorative note.

Seen in the light of the above, Gaines's use of personal names in both the monologue headings and the text of *A Gathering of Old Men* prompts certain comments. In the novel's monologue headings, formal names always precede informal names and are printed in upper-case type (unlike informal names which appear in lower case, except for initial letters, of course). In the text, though, characters almost invariably refer to themselves or are referred to by their informal names. When formal names are used within the monologues, they are always used deliberately and with specific purpose. The informal names in the monologue headings take various forms. Of the fifteen speakers, ten are informally identified by nicknames, and of these ten, eight are black males (mainly the old men) whose nicknames range from the unflattering *Dirty Red* to the neutral *Rufe* and *Cherry*. The other nicknames belong to young white men. Horace Thomson, a member of the lynch gang, is called *Sharp*; Thomas Vincent Sullivan, an LSU football player, is also known as *TV* or *Sully*. But for one, *Lou Dimes*, which is a pseudonym, the other informal names are diminutive forms: the black housekeeper Janice Robinson is called *Janey*; Mathew Lincoln Brown is known as *Mat*; Myrtle Bouchard, an older white woman, is *Merle*; the white bartender Jacques Thibeaux is *Ti-Jack*.

Generally speaking, then, the blacks' informal names are nicknames; the whites', diminutive forms. This situation is dictated, at least in part, by racial politics in a community where there is intercourse between black and white. That is to say, whites address blacks by their nicknames, some of which are pejorative, but blacks do not address whites by nicknames.

Miss Merle, for example, is known as *Miss Owl* in the quarter but is not addressed as such.

It is evident that Gaines, in establishing his monologue headings according to a fixed pattern which allows for certain variations within that pattern, is drawing the reader's attention to the relative significance within his fiction of formal and informal names. It is worth noting as well that in two of the early monologues, which deal with Candy's efforts to mount her plan for the protection of Mathu, the reader's attention is directed to the subject of names in an overt way. In the opening monologue the boy Snookum recalls running through the quarter summoning the people to Mathu's yard: "I didn't see half the people I was hollering at. ... I just hollered names; running, spanking my butt, and hollering names"(7). In the third monologue Miss Merle recounts her efforts, again prompted by Candy, to get Janey, the Marshall's maid, to muster assistance in Mathu's cause. "Make her give you some names," Candy tells Miss Merle, "Lots of names." When Merle approaches Janey her requests are replete with the same emphases. "You and Bea think up some names," she says. "Think up a dozen of them"(25). And later: "You all better have me some more names ready. You hear me, don't you?"(26) Such repeated injunctions may perhaps be read as decontextualized directives to Gaines's reading audience to be alert to the import of names in the novel.

Two observations seem pertinent as to the particular appropriateness of Gaines's monologue headings. First, the play between formal and informal names announced there continues in the novel proper, pointing to its major themes of the coming of age of persons and the concomitant maturing of the society which is the novel's setting. Second, the novel includes some important characters whose names do not follow the model announced in the monologue headings, and in most cases this departure is significant.

A number of characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* are not given informal names. Sheriff Mapes and his deputy Griffin are never referred to or spoken of by any but their family names. By virtue of their function in the society, and especially because of the bullish methods they use to assert their authority, they are outside the pale of both white and black, not on good enough terms with anyone to be granted the privilege of a familiar name. By contrast the novel's other policeman, Russell, is referred to as *Russ* by both Mapes and Gil Boutan. He acts much less belligerently than his fellow officers, even though his assignment at the "headquarters" of the potential lynch party is a particularly sensitive one. Of the old men come to defend Mathu, all of whom are known to each other and call each other by nicknames or diminutives, Jacob Aguillard is an exception: he is given no familiar name. Until that afternoon, he, as a Creole, has stood apart from

the rest of the Afro-American community, his sense of superiority attested to by his light skin and French New Orleans bloodline. Mathu himself is addressed only by that name: not only is he given no familiar name (*Mathu* is an anglicized pronunciation of the French Christian name *Mathieu*), but also we do not learn his family name. He too has lived outside the circle of the Afro-American community, the source of his aloofness and sense of superiority his blue-black complexion, the proof that his pure "Singaleese"[3] blood has never been diluted with white. Reverend Jameson, understandably, has no familiar name, but that is not as much a sign of respect for him and his office as an indication of the indifference and dislike with which he is regarded in his community. As the afternoon wears on and the preacher betrays his cowardice, references and addresses to him deteriorate from the respectful "Jameson," or "Reverend Jameson" to "that preacher Jameson" and finally to "bootlicker" and "old possum-looking fool" (106). Jameson too is on the outside, the novel's principal Uncle Tom figure. It is important to note that our recognition of the social status of Mapes, Griffin, Aguillard, Mathu, and Jameson as evidenced by the lack of each of a familiar name is a product of the repeated use of familiar names in the novel's monologue titles and text: because these characters break the conventional pattern of naming, we are forced to assess the relevance of the deviations from the pattern.

However, the more important aspect of Gaines's strategy with names is his working within the established pattern itself rather than with deviations from it. It is Mat, one of the old men, who raises the issue of personal names in the first place. As Mat proceeds with his friends by truck to Mathu's yard he describes one of their number, Robert Louis Stevenson Banks aka Chimley:

> Chimley was sitting in the middle. He was smaller than me and Cherry Bello. Blacker than me and Cherry too, that'a why we all called him Chimley. He didn't mind his friends calling him Chimley, 'cause he knowed they didn't mean nothing. But he sure didn't like them 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. (39–40)

According to Mat, Chimley is sensitive to his nickname because it draws attention to the blackness of his skin. The whites' insistence on using the name, even when he objects, amounts to a denial of his real identity as a person, and a confirmation of all that his blackness entails about his restricted place in the human brotherhood. Of course, he tolerates the name from other blacks because he knows they share with him the liabilities of color, even if he is of a blacker shade than they.

The same preoccupation about names recurs, in even more pointed fashion, in a later monologue by Joseph Seaberry aka Rufe in which he records the old men's spoken histories of past oppression. One such history is told by Yank, who in his time has made a living breaking horses and mules, but whose job has become superfluous with the mechanization of farming. Yank speaks with pride of his career, enumerating the names of the animals he has trained and recalling their careers:

> "That's right. Anybody needed a horse broke they called on Yank. In the parish, out the parish they called on Yank. Any time they needed a horse broke for a lady they called Yank, 'cause they knowed I knowed my stuff. Lots of these rich white folks you see riding these fine horses in Mardi Gras parades, prancing all over the place, I broke them horses. I, Sylvester J. Battley." (98)

Yank's invocation of his full formal name reenacts Chimley's gestures in kind, but in a more solemn public way, in the presence of the white officers of the law and of his black brothers and sisters. Minutes later, after Yank proclaims his murder of Beau, Sheriff Mapes instructs his deputy Griffin to put Yank's name on the record. Griffin complies: "I got it. Yank. Y-a-n-." But he is cut off. "Sylvester J. Battley," Yank says. "Be sure and spell Sylvester and Battley right, if you can. When my folks read about me up north, I want them to be proud" (99). Yank's insistence on using his formal name and on having it inscribed on an "official document" is of a piece with his pride in his ability, finally, to make a stand.

Early in his account Yank has occasion to list the names of some of those in attendance at Candy's rendezvous: "Mathu, Rufe, Tucker, Gable, Glo." Soon after he is calling out the names of his horses and mules: "Snook, Chip, Diamond, Job, Tiny, Tony, Sally, Dot, Lucky, John Strutter, Lottie ..." Gaines's point is well made: the names on the two lists are interchangeable; names by which blacks and animals are called are the same. Hence the necessity for the Chimleys and Yanks to assert the existence of their real selves, to identify themselves as human. And, of course, the impetus for this self-acknowledgement is their pride in coming to Mathu's defence and reversing years and generations of passivity and fear.

It is in the words of the slow-witted Charlie Biggs that the recognition of one's coming of age and the insistence on being called by one's formal name come together most explicitly. Charlie appears on the scene late in the afternoon and reveals, to the surprise of all but Mathu, that he has killed Boutan. He has spent the afternoon cowering, as he has spent his life running, but has now emerged of his own will, ready to shoulder his responsibility.

> "I'm a man," he says to Lou Dimes. "I want the world to know it. I ain't Big Charlie, nigger boy, no more. Y'all hear me? A man come back. Not no nigger boy. A nigger boy run and run and run. But a man come back. I'm a man."

Then he says to Mapes:

> "Sheriff, I'm a man. And just like I call you Sheriff, I think I ought to have a handle too—like Mister. Mister Biggs." (187)

Mapes complies with Charlie's request, repeatedly calling him *Mr. Biggs*, and according to Lou Dimes, in whose monologue Charlie's revelation is related, he does so "with sincerity." Charlie's satisfaction is complete: he has become a man, and that attainment has been recognized by the officer of law. Subsequently, just before Charlie is killed in the gunfight, Lou Dimes, echoing Mapes's acknowledgement of Charlie's manhood, shouts to him, "Hey Charlie—Mr. Biggs." Charlie's answer reinstates the informal name to acceptability. Once Charlie has been acknowledged to exist, has been rendered visible, he no longer considers the informal name to be identified with his former self. "That's all right, you can call me Charlie," he shouts back. "We all in the dirt now, and it ain't no more Mister and no more Miss" (205). Charlie's response draws attention to the common lot of all, as does his earlier reiterated celebration of his newly acquired manhood. His coming of age is not merely a growing up but a growing beyond the limits his color has imposed. He has acquired at least for the space of his short happy life an entry into the human brotherhood.

It is possible to see in Charlie's acceptance by Mapes and Lou Dimes the signs of a certain loosening of Jim Crow attitudes and a certain easing of tensions between white and black, particularly in the context of other evidence to the same effect. Gil Boutan, an LSU football player, brother of the murdered Beau, rejects his father's invitation to avenge in the traditional way his brother's murder. Gil is committed to the principles and practice of racial equality, and is encouraged by the policeman Russell to maintain this commitment even in the face of the painful rupture with his father and family. Russell tells him: "Sometimes you got to hurt something to help something. Sometimes you have to plow under one thing in order for something else to grow. ... You can help the country to-morrow. You can help yourself" (151). "To-morrow" is the day of the football game between LSU and Mississippi in which Gil will play in the LSU backfield before a national television audience with the black player Calvin Harrison. The information about Gil's football career comes in a monologue spoken by the third-string LSU quarterback, Thomas Vincent

Sullivan. "It will be the first time this has happened," remarks Sullivan, in reference to the television appearence of the integrated backfield, and the two players will play mutually supportive roles.

Here again, much is made of details of naming and calling. Sullivan's first mention of the mixed backfield incorporates their nicknames and their formal names: Calvin "Pepper" Harrison and Gilbert "Salt" Boutan. Thus nicknames are not seen as negating identity as they are elsewhere in the novel. Here, the total names of the black and white players are pronounced in parallel terms, and the nature of the two nicknames stresses the mutually complementary roles of the athletes. To be noted especially is Harrison's nickname *Pepper*. Like the name *Chimley*, *Pepper* draws attention to skin color. However, Harrison does not resent it and Gil and Sullivan use it easily and without self-consciousness. Like the new Charlie Biggs, "Pepper" Harrison has been given assurance of his importance, at least within the limited society of a racially mixed college football team.

Evidently, times are changing in Gaines's St. Raphael's parish and perhaps beyond; "something else is growing," to use Russell's words. The collective attitudinal growth of a region or a nation is always a factor of the maturing of its individual people. Here, maturing involves for some the recognition of their subservience and the courage to address it, and for others the acknowledgement of misplaced assumptions of superiority and the willingness to be freed of them. The significance of personal names as tools of manipulation and as measures of intrinsic human quality is at the heart of Gaines's novel.

What's in a name? asked the poet. A great deal, counters Gaines, for whose characters life is assuredly no bed of roses. Charlie Biggs's comment, "We all in the same dirt now, and it ain't no more Mr. and no more Miss," points hopefully to the new era proposed in Russell's advice to Gil Boutan about the necessity of producing the conditions "for something else to grow." But Russell also draws attention to the prematurity of Charlie's hope when he says: "Sometimes you got to hurt something to help something. Sometimes you have to plow under one thing. ..." The rose that by any other name would smell as sweet, that is, the racially mixed society that will use names without discrimination of color and thus evidence equality, will be a product of the new growth Russell envisages. Gaines's old and young men alike enact the breaking of the new ground in their creator's dramatization of the conditions that make such a new growth both necessary and possible.

It is surely relevant to mention, although this is not an explicit factor in Gaines's analysis in *A Gathering of Old Men*, that the insistence of such characters as Robert Louis Stevenson Banks aka Chimley, Sylvester J.

Battley aka Yank, and Charlie Biggs aka Big Charlie that they be called by their full formal names replicates the emancipated slaves' gesture of taking family names (or of revealing family names already taken). Inscoe's comment on the importance of surnames for the newly freed blacks might be applied as well to Gaines's gathered old men: "The changes in black names that came with emancipation reveal a great deal about the freedmen's attitudes towards themselves and their identities during this complex transitional period" (553). During the complex transitional period following the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, a century after the original Emancipation Proclamation, Gaines appeared to anticipate a more thorough-going, less troubled emancipation.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Northeast Modern Language Association in Toronto in 1990.

2. Inscoe's study is limited to the situation in North and South Carolina. He writes concerning given names: "That such a remarkable degree of homogeneity of names and naming trends existed despite the variety of situations and sources from which the names were drawn suggests that this two-state sample is by no means unique but is rather a model representative of slaves throught the South" (530–31). It seems reasonable to assume, as well, that the situation concerning the taking of family names was generalized throughout the South.

3. Clatoo, the old man who refers to Mathu as "one of them blue-black Singaleese niggers," most certainly means that Mathu is Senegalese. In Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the central character/narrator refers to Harriet Black, a queenly woman of blue-black skin, as "one of them Singalee people" (131). Both "Singaleese" and "Singalee" are surely local pronunciations of Senegalese.

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