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English (Literature)
Cultural Memory and Narrative Voice in Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men*
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This project examines the changes Ernest Gaines made in his early manuscripts of *A Gathering of Old Men*, specifically with the focus on the pivotal shift from a white male newspaper reporter as narrator to multiple narrators, including white and mostly African American elders living in the former slave quarters community of a Louisiana plantation. While scholars continue to engage in critical analyses of the fiction of Ernest Gaines, very few refer to the evolution of his fiction. In examining *A Gathering of Old Men*, scholars focus significantly on the shifting definitions and theories of justice and masculinity, especially as delineated by race, as well as Gaines's choice of multiple and multi-racial narrators as part of the ongoing conversations about racial identity and justice (Beavers 166; Hebert-Leiter 110; Doyle 182-183).

To explore the changes made to Gaines' early manuscripts through the lenses of critical race theory and cultural memory—defined by Erll and Nünning as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (4)—I proposed a set of related research questions: What might Gaines' pivotal narrative shift from a white male newspaper reporter to a set of multiple racially diverse narrators suggest about the importance of cultural memory and storytelling? How does cultural memory facilitate the expression of racial identity and quest for justice?

Our approach to Gaines's novels coincides with a form of textual criticism called Versioning, defined as the term would suggest, as showcasing the multiple versions of a text rather than one definitive text deemed to be the most reliable critical edition (Keleman 112). Donald Reiman, who established this alternative approach, recognizes the value of providing these versions (including earlier drafts) as a way of allowing readers without specialized training to engage in the speculation about historical or cultural influences that are reflected in or associated with any one stage or version of the work (Keleman 112). This activity now includes criticism itself in that looking at various versions can facilitate interpretations of meaning. Kelemen claims, “Textual criticism concerns itself with the text's transmission history, and since that history is the history of aesthetic and political choices, textual criticism goes hand in hand with other critical approaches” (8).

Beginning with the handwritten drafts of the early version titled “The Revenge of Old Men,” I read each iteration of the novel and created a record of the types of narrative changes made from one draft to the next, focusing on which voices were prioritized. There were three sets of handwritten drafts that were available and reasonable to examine for the scope of my project—the first using one narrator, the subsequent indicating Gaines' contemplation of dominantly white narrative voice, and the last indicating Gaines' experimentation with African American voices to carry the story. After examining and recording the changes, I interpreted them using methods of textual criticism as articulated in the guide, *Textual Editing and Criticism* by Erick Keleman and *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship*—both of which situate the practice of textual editing within the sociopolitical realm to speculate about the evolving narration in which diverse characters carry the story.

Results from the examination of drafts suggest the connectedness and mutual reciprocity of narrative voice and cultural memory as well as the importance of one's social location when it comes to storytelling or the expression of the lived human experience. The first set of drafts

featured a singular and white narrative voice—the white male newspaper reporter—with no African American narrators. Therefore, in this iteration, the African American experience was not fully captured, and cultural memory was not actualized. The second set of drafts featured a narrative voice wherein the white newspaper reporter was the dominant voice among a few African American narrators. Here, the African American experience was somewhat captured by virtue of the experimentation with African American voices, but the prioritization and dominance of the white narrative voice prevented cultural memory from being fully actualized. The third set of drafts featured a dominantly African American narrative voice among a few white voices. This set of drafts features the most effective narratorial presentation in terms of fully capturing the African American experience and fully actualizing cultural memory—a story about African Americans ought to be carried by African American voices. These results ultimately suggest that viewing authenticity as a noble and necessary goal of literature, i.e., as historicization, narratorial racial representation, is central in capturing the lived human experience and unlocking cultural memory.

Works Cited

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