



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Notions of Manhood and the Role of Women
Characters in Three Books by 20th Century African
American Writers from the American South“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2019 / Vienna 2019

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von / Supervisor:

emer. o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written over a period of almost five years with a long break in between. Therefore, I would like to express my particular thanks and gratitude to my supervisor, emer. o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, who has accompanied me through all these years with incredible patience, understanding and encouragement, and has offered me much needed guidance and advice on how to finally bring this project to a successful end.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their continuous support and for always being there for me no matter what. Thank you to Christoph for being a paragon of patience and for putting up with my crazy/laziness and thank you to my MA-family for letting me fully focus on the completion of my studies this year. I am grateful for your support and humbled by your unwavering belief in me.

Abbreviations

GOM:	<i>A Gathering of Old Men</i>
MOT:	<i>The Marrow of Tradition</i>
OALD:	<i>Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary</i>
TKM:	<i>The Known World</i>

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1 Introduction

While attending Prof. Zacharasiewicz's seminar on recent fiction from the American South, I was introduced to Ernest J. Gaines and his works and have been fascinated by his writings ever since. Especially the way in which he approaches issues of manhood and dignity in the Southern societies depicted in *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* sparked my interest and led me to question how black and white men are represented in Southern works of fiction of different time periods. Using Gaines's representation of characters and the hardships and challenges they must overcome in order to find their own identities as a starting point, I soon delved into the worlds of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, among others.

With its unusual plot revolving around a black slave owner, the more recent and lesser known novel *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones struck me as particularly interesting, and I started to wonder how its male characters would perceive and claim notions of manhood in a society that values the ownership of human property above everything else. While its main focus lies on the time of slavery, the novel's complex narrative also stretches beyond the Civil War and well into the 20th century.

Since I wanted to examine different periods of Southern US history, the post-Reconstruction society of Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* provided me with the opportunity to explore Southern concepts of masculinity at the beginning of the 20th century. The characters' quest for manhood within the limitations of their deeply segregated community offers valuable insights into the workings of the male mind in a society that is governed by racial and economic fears. While *The Known World* is set on Virginia's slave plantations of the mid-nineteenth century, *The Marrow of Tradition* explores an urban community in North Carolina at the turn of the 20th century.

Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*, then, completes the circle as it moves back onto the plantation again. Although the novel is set in the late 1970s, well after the Civil Rights Movement, life in Gaines's fictional Louisianan St. Raphael Parish seems largely unchanged. Racial conflicts still govern the novel's society, and the male characters' notions of manhood are heavily affected by their burdensome pasts.

I will therefore use Jones's *The Known World*, Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* and Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* in this thesis to attempt to draw a picture of Southern society from the time of slavery over the post-Reconstruction period to the post-civil rights era. By closely examining these three novels, I want to explore the different approaches to black and white manhood as displayed in the respective communities and show how they are influenced and changed by the progress of time. Furthermore, since no society can consist of men alone, I want to analyze how women characters are represented in the novels, and what role they play in their respective worlds. I am particularly interested in how they contribute to the formation and upholding of their communities and want to show how they influence or inhibit the development of the male characters.

I will start by taking into account the authors' own lives as well as the epochs of US history of which their stories can be viewed as symptomatic of. Chapter 2 will therefore offer an introduction and overview of the three authors and their works and will particularly focus on narrative cornerstones such as time, setting, structure and narrative technique. In my opinion, it is also necessary to take into consideration the myriad of thematic concerns raised by each novel, which often reflect urgent issues of greater social relevance to the society depicted in each book. While their in-depth analysis would certainly go beyond the scope of this thesis, each section of chapter 2 will briefly introduce an overview of these themes and issues.

Chapters 3 and 4 will then turn to the texts proper and an investigation of the gender configurations within the social settings of slavery, post-Reconstruction and post-Civil Rights Movement. In chapter 3, I will offer an examination of the concepts of masculinity and notions of manhood as represented in the novels based on a close reading of each text. Beginning in section 3.1 with *The Known World*, the analysis will show how black and white manhood is established within the larger system of slavery and the world of human property. In section 3.2, the focus will then shift to *The Marrow of Tradition* and will examine what it means to be a man in an urban Southern society that is characterized by rising tensions between its black and white communities. Finally, section 3.3 will treat the rural post-civil rights world of *A Gathering of Old Men*, and will offer insights into the late reclaiming of black manhood and dignity by a group of elderly black men.

I will eventually turn to the role of women characters in chapter 4, which will engage with questions of how female characters are depicted in each novel, what

impact they have on their communities, and how societal change is picked up and sustained in the novels. The first section 4.1 will treat the representation of white and black female characters in *The Known World* and will expose the environment of the South during the time of slavery as having a toxic influence even on the most well-meaning individuals. Section 4.2, then, will turn to the few women characters depicted in *The Marrow of Tradition*. Though their roles are traditionally associated with the private space, the analysis will show that societal progress is dependent upon the active inclusion and participation of progressive women in order to create real change. Finally, the last section 4.3 will demonstrate that despite its title, *A Gathering of Old Men* features a handful of female characters who powerfully influence the course of action depicted in the novel. In this last part, I will argue that despite the black characters' feelings that the South has remained largely unchanged, sustainable progress is made possible when the white community finally acknowledges the black community's agency and independence.

In the end, chapter 5 will conclude the main findings of the previous chapters and will offer comparisons between the three books in order to gain an impression of the changing social, racial and gender landscapes of the US South.

2 Jones, Chesnutt, Gaines: from slavery to the post-Civil Rights Movement

2.1 Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003)

Edward Jones's *The Known World* was published in 2003, and was highly praised by reviewers. Although it was his first novel, critics were especially fond of his use of language and the historical accuracy depicted, and they applauded his vivid characterizations while avoiding typical stereotypes. *The Known World* was nominated for a National Book Award in 2003 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 2004 (*Encyclopedia of World Biography* 2019).

2.1.1 About the author

Edward Paul Jones was born in Arlington, Virginia, in 1950, and was raised in extreme poverty in Washington, D.C. (N. Tucker 2009). After his undergraduate studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, he went on to the University of Virginia to graduate with an MFA in 1981. Following a very brief excursion into the world of university teaching, he worked as a proofreader for 10 years ("Jones", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2018).

The publication of his first short story collection, *Lost in the City*, in 1992 earned him a Lannan Literary Fellowship and a PEN/Hemingway Award (Lannan Foundation 2019). After he had lost his proofreading job, he started to write full-time and published his first, and so far only, novel, *The Known World*, in 2003 (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2018). He was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 2004 (*Harper Collins* 2019) and published his second short story collection *All Aunt Hagar's Children* in 2006 ("Jones", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2018).

Jones's works "depict the effects of slavery in antebellum America and the lives of working-class African Americans" ("Jones", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2018). His writing style and focus on place are often compared to two of his well-known role models, James Joyce and Isaac Bashevis Singer (Als 2019). In Jones's case, his fiction usually focuses on the area of the segregated Washington, D.C., where he himself was raised in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1.2 Plot summary

Although the African American Henry Townsend had been a slave during his childhood and youth, having been bought free by his father Augustus, he soon decides to become a slave owner himself. With the help of his former master William Robbins, Henry buys his first slave, Moses, builds his house with him, marries the African American Caldonia and has thirty-three slaves to his name when he dies from an illness at the age of 31. After his death, his legacy is now in the hands of his widowed wife, who is influenced in her decision of what to do with it by family members and friends alike. Henry's death creates a tightly woven net of memories connecting the past to the uncertain present and to glimpses of the future and triggers a series of life-changing events for various characters. For instance, slaves seem to slowly disappear from the Townsend plantation, while Moses attempts to take Henry's place as Caldonia's new husband, and Augustus Townsend is first abducted and then brutally murdered. Despite the often tragic fates of many characters, the end of the novel with former slave Alice being an artist in Washington, D.C. suggests a growing sense of freedom on the advance.

2.1.3 Time and setting

As *The Known World* is comprised of a series of interwoven narratives with frequent flashbacks and glimpses of the future, it is particularly hard to pinpoint any exact dates. Broadly speaking, the novel and its narratives cover the time span from the 1840s to the early 1990s (Harris-Lopez 53). The main storyline, centering on the events following Henry's death, focuses on 1855 (King 356), and is argued to end in 1861 (Maslin 2003), after the slave Moses escapes the Townsend plantation, hides at Henry's mother's house and is finally discovered by the Sheriff's cousin, Counsel Skiffington.

The Known World is set in antebellum Virginia, in the fictional county of Manchester. Most narratives, as well as the main storyline on the Townsend plantation, are set here, others also offer glimpses of Washington, D.C. and New York. Manchester County, then, is described as the largest county in the Commonwealth of Virginia (*TKW*, 23), which is frequently manifested in the novel by the vast distances between the individual plantations. Whereas the town itself is only

hinted at, the novel draws a rough map of the plantations spread out around the town, of which the most prominent are those of the rivaling figures William Robbins and Robert Colfax. Henry's plantation is located next to William Robbins's (*TKW*, 122), whereas his freed parents moved as far away from the plantations as they could, settling on the south-western end of Manchester County with "the nearest white man with slaves [...] half a mile away" (15).

2.1.4 Structure and narrative technique

The Known World is a third-person omniscient narrative, in which the narrator has an unlimited, privileged access to the characters' thoughts and feelings, knows everything there is to know about their past, present and future, and is free to move in time and place. Although all-knowing, the narrator does not get involved in commenting upon or evaluating the actions presented in the novel, and as such is best characterized as unobtrusive, or impersonal (see "Point of View" 300-303). By using this kind of narrator, Jones managed to create a God-like authority that is also alluded to at the end of the book, where Calvin describes Alice's painting as an image of "what God sees when He looks down" (*TKW*, 384). As Maslin (2003) argues, the novel's viewpoint has the same effect on its readers, presenting multiple narratives, a vast number of different but always interlinked characters, and laying out a quite detailed map of the community around Henry Townsend, frequently not in chronological order. This kind of spatial logic dominant in the novel is further emphasized by the frequent use of spatial vocabulary, describing which characters live close or distant from one another, how long the journey from one end of the county to the other will take, or what happens to two geographically distant characters at the same time.

Due to its manifold plotlines, attempting to find a simple structure in *The Known World* is rather difficult. The novel is divided into 12 chapters, each being headed by an allegorical chapter heading like "Namesakes. Scheherazade. Waiting for the End of the World" (*TKW*, 245). Most of the narratives featured in the novel can, in some way or another, be linked directly to Henry Townsend. After his death at the beginning of the book, the reader gets to know more not only about Henry's life, but about the lives and social relations of many people of his community. Therefore, I would read Henry's character as a sort of reference point for all major and minor

storylines in the novel. His death triggers not only a series of immediate events revolving around his widow and his land, but causes the members of his community to reveal their own personal stories, both long before and long after his death. Consequently, I would argue that *The Known World* unfolds in a circular fashion, with Henry at its central point. This circular, or spiral, structure is most apparent when the narrative introduces the reader to a new character, who usually finds him- or herself in a specific situation. Often, the narrative then moves away, focusing on another story and other characters, only to return to the former character in more detail as the plot develops.

Secondly, I would propose that despite the numerous individual stories, various characters and frequent jumps in time, the novel can roughly be divided into two halves. The first half reaches up to chapter eight, and basically introduces the reader to life in Manchester County, to most of the characters, to the main narrative, and generally to the community of the novel. It tells the story of Henry, how the former slave became a slave owner himself, and what difficulties and obstacles he had to face, and ends after his death, when the first of Caldonia's caretakers start to leave her plantation again. The second half, then, seems to present rather negative events, like the abduction of Augustus, the failed flight attempt and crippling of Moses, and the murders of Sheriff Skiffington, Augustus and Mildred. In other words, I would suggest that the second half of the novel deals with the collapse and dissolution of the community. Interestingly, however, the depiction of overly negative events in this second half does not mean that the novel also ends on a negative note. Quite on the contrary, I would argue that the ending of the novel, with Calvin discovering Alice and her paintings alive and well in Washington, D.C., leaves the reader with the feeling that finally things seem to be changing after all.

Although the setting of the novel is entirely fictional, Jones frequently supports his story by references to actual historical data, like census reports, statistical information and real court decisions (*TKW*, 7; 22). By creating such a solely fictional world, and then backing up its authenticity with historical details, Jones managed to have both the freedom to imagine, and, at the same time, to create the impression that *The Known World* could be the realistic account of an often neglected part of slavery.

2.1.5 Thematic concerns

The most apparent, and probably also most peculiar, because historically true, issue dealt with in *The Known World* is the fact that free African Americans were allowed to own other blacks as their slaves before the Civil War. By choosing this particular aspect of slavery, Jones sheds light on an often neglected and, to many readers, unknown part of slavery and deals with the question of inner racism. One of the primary issues that pervade *The Known World* is the question of whether it is right for black people to own black slaves, and Jones explores this paradox and the intricacies of slavery as a whole through stories that demonstrate how social codes in the antebellum South had been far from fixed. *The Known World* features white and black slave owners alongside black and white slaves, as well as poor whites, wealthy blacks, native Americans and people of European descent. Thus, it illustrates how the seemingly binary oppositions of black and white are integrated into a larger, multifaceted society, and how issues of class even further complicate issues of race.

This connects directly to yet another thematic concern dealt with in Jones's novel, namely the interplay and social consequences of race and class issues. In the community of Manchester County, the prevailing mechanism of social hierarchy seems not so much to be race, but rather class. I would argue that within this community, it is the slave owners that are at the top of the social hierarchy, simply because they are the owners of property. This is best exemplified by the most prominent slave owners in the novel, the rivalling William Robbins and Robert Colfax. They own the two largest plantations in Manchester County, have the most property, i.e. slaves, and are thus depicted as the most influential and powerful figures in their community. Although he does not support the concept of slavery and refuses to own slaves himself, Sheriff John Skiffington's place in this hierarchy is alongside or just slightly below these two slave owners because he functions as the representative of the law. Next come the slave patrollers, most of whom are described as rather shady characters, and own their high hierarchical place solely to their connection to the law. Free blacks in the novel find their place only below these patrollers, which is also frequently demonstrated in the narrative, with free African Americans repeatedly harassed by the patrollers. The slaves are, of course, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, since they are the property that determines their owners' status. Thus, I would suggest that Manchester County is highly shaped by the so-called "logic of

property” (Bieger 412), implying that even racial issues are less important than a person’s place in society, which is determined by whether or not the person owns other persons. Within the community in the novel, even white characters like John Skiffington appear suspicious by their rejection of owning human property.

These community-dynamics are also a central focus of the novel. As Richard King argues, “the novel is more about the threat of dissolution to the known world in Manchester County” (356), than about the fate of any individual character. Although Henry Townsend and his death are quite central to the novel, the narrative is less concerned with Henry’s fate than with the impact of his death on his whole community. Quite frequently, the novel elaborates on how a decision or an action of one character directly influences other characters, or even the community as a whole. When at the end of the novel, for example, the two wealthiest men of Manchester County enter a legal battle over the estate of the murdered Augustus Townsend, the break-up of all ties between Robert Colfax and William Robbins leads to the eventual dissolution of the whole county (*TKW*, 377).

Finally, the deep concern of the novel with its central community is also articulated through the detailed descriptions of distances between the characters in the novel, and a sort of mapping of the world of Manchester County. This cumulates during the whole narrative, until finally, it climaxes in the form of an actual map of the county drawn by the now free-black woman, Alice Night. “The Known World” is the title of Sheriff Skiffington’s wooden map, which is allegedly the very first map of the world including the United States. However, even at the time of the novel, this map is already outdated and has only little to do with the world that the sheriff himself knows. Similarly, even the title of the novel can be interpreted in this way, since the story of black slave owners before the Civil War is arguably unknown to many of its reader, and thus far from being a “known world”. Alice’s map, then, represents an almost godlike perspective of Manchester County, which she has been able to explore during her nighttime tours. It miraculously captures the past, present and future onto one single piece of canvas, similar to how *The Known World* unfolds a genealogy weaving throughout one single novel.

2.2 Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

The Marrow of Tradition was published in 1901 and was the second published novel by Charles Chesnutt. Although relatively unknown to audiences of the late 19th century, Chesnutt's work has received renewed attention since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. As the author of more than fifty stories, two short story collections and six novels, essays, poems, letters and a biography of Frederick Douglass, Chesnutt has, "[w]ith remarkable swiftness [...] become a major figure in American literary history" (Bentley, and Gunning vii). *The Marrow of Tradition* is based on the historical accounts of two race riots of the post-Reconstruction era, namely the Wilmington Race Riots of 1898, in which Southern white democrats "stag[ed] a bloody riot" to gain control of the Republican-led city (cf. Bentley, and Gunning 5ff.), and the New Orleans race riot of July 1900 (Fraser 364). At the time of its publication, the novel "earned tepid sales and largely disappointing reviews". Critics particularly considered it to be too inflammatory and "bitter" (Bentley, and Gunning 26). Today, it is praised for "how acutely [it] explore[s] the racial dynamics" at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bentley, and Gunning 26).

2.2.1 About the author

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858, the son of free blacks who had emigrated from North Carolina ("Chesnutt", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2019). While his two grandmothers were African Americans, his two grandfathers were white, and so Chesnutt, although proud of his strong white skin color and easily able to pass for white, grew up as an African American (Andrews 1). After the Civil War, when he was eight years old, his family decided to move back to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he was instantly confronted with issues that arose from his mixed-race heritage, like how one's skin color and family blood still determined the prospects of a person in almost all aspects of their life (Andrews 1). Although, as Chesnutt has pointed out, "reconstruction had little concrete effect on the ingrained prejudices left over from the old regime", it did indeed make it possible for Chesnutt to attend school (Andrews 2). At the age of 14, he became an assistant to a black educator in Charlotte, North Carolina, and at the age of 19, he became Principal of the Fayetteville Normal School for Negroes (Andrews 3ff.). He married when he was

20 years old, and left North Carolina again after Reconstruction because he felt that in the South, he was “neither fish, flesh, nor fowl – neither ‘nigger,’ white, nor ‘buckrah” (Andrews 8). With hopes that his life would be better in the North, he began writing his first tales, stories and essays in Cleveland. In August 1887, his story “The Goophered Grapevine” became “the first work by a black [to be] accepted by *The Atlantic Monthly*” (“Chesnutt”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2019), one of the leading American literary magazines of that time (Andrews 19). In 1899, Chesnutt submitted two collections of similar stories to a publishing house, which released *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* within the same year. Only one year later, his first novel *The House behind the Cedars* followed. While this book focused on two blacks passing for white in the postwar South, his second novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) presents a plea for racial justice. After his final novel, *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), proved to be even less successful than its precedents, Chesnutt “lapsed into silence” (Andrews 261). Instead, he focused on his stenography business (128) and remained politically active, for which he was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1928 (219). Four years later, he died at the age of 74 (273).

As a person of mixed race himself, questions of racial injustice and heritage are among the most pressing issues throughout Chesnutt’s literary writings (Andrews 3f.). Among his works are short stories, novels, and a schoolroom biography of Frederick Douglass (Andrews 264). Though he did not achieve commercial success during his lifetime, “[n]o black writer of [his] era was able to elicit this amount of attention and active promotion from the upper echelons of white publishing establishment” (Andrews 273), and critics’ appraisal of his work has increased since his death. Today, Chesnutt “has become a major figure in American literary history” (Bentley, and Gunning vii).

2.2.2 Plot summary

In Wellington in North Carolina, Major Carteret, editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, allies with fellow white supremacists General Belmont and Captain McBane in an attempt to eventually overthrow what they call “Negro domination” in their local government. Meanwhile, the black Dr. Miller returns from medical training in the North to his wife

Janet, who is the racially mixed half-sister of Carteret's wife Olivia, and establishes a local black hospital in Wellington. Olivia Carteret, who just gave birth to her first child, struggles with the truth of her father's scandalous second marriage to an African American servant and the existence of her half-sister. Over time, her husband and his like-minded allies set in motion several events that ultimately culminate in a murderous riot against Wellington's African Americans, thereby accidentally also causing the death of Miller's only son. Upon returning to his home, Carteret finds his own son struggling with death from suffocation. Due to the riots, no physician is available, and his sole hope is to ask Miller to save the life of his child. Only after a final confrontation between the two half-sisters, Janet allows her husband to perform the urgently needed operation, thus saving the infant's life.

2.2.3 Time and setting

The Marrow of Tradition is set at the turn of the nineteenth century in the fictional town of Wellington, North Carolina (Lehman 280), and was written and published at a time when it became clear that Reconstruction had failed, and extreme discrimination, violence and racial tensions were common practices of poverty-stricken whites to reestablish their supremacy and making the Freedmen second class citizens with next to no rights. As Bentley and Gunning observe, though the novel "is set in the contemporary moment of Chesnut's turn-of-the-century world, the inextricably linked worlds of black and white [...] go back to the formative years of slavery and the period that officially came to be known as Reconstruction" (7). The narrative is almost exclusively set within the town limits of Wellington, with only a few exceptions, like Dr. Miller's train ride or a brief episode at Old Mr. Delamere's estate outside of Wellington. The most prominent sites in the novel are Major Carteret's house, the Clarendon Club, the offices of the *Morning Chronicle*, the St. James Hotel and Old Mr. Delamere's townhouse. Although several decades ago, Wellington was known for "the world's greatest shipping port for naval stores" (*MOT*, 102) the town is now described as struggling economically. Consequently, many of the white inhabitants are left without a decent income, which only further contributes to the already tense relationship between blacks and whites.

2.2.4 Structure and narrative technique

The Marrow of Tradition is divided into 37 chapters, and its plot is regarded as one of Chesnutt's most complicated and complexly interrelated works (Andrews 177). The novel is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator (see "Point of View" 300-303) and comprises various subplots that are all in one way or another interrelated with the core narrative around the families of Major Carteret and Dr. Miller (see Andrews 177f.). At first glance, these two families could not appear any more different. As Andrews observes, the white Carteret-family "represent[s] the pride and prejudices of the New South aristocracy", while the Millers are of mixed-blood and represent Chesnutt's idea of the "New Negro" (178). Nevertheless, the wives of these two families are half-sisters, and Olivia's rejection of Janet is only one of many racial injustices in Wellington that are exposed in the novel. The importance of family is also strengthened by the novel's structure, as the narrative starts with an episode in the Carteret family home in which Olivia gives birth to their first and only child, Dodie. Similarly, also the novel's ending centers on a family scene, this time bringing together the two half-sisters in the Millers' home, one desperately trying to save her son's life and the other refraining from vengeance despite having experienced a lifetime full of bitterness that could prevent the child's rescue.

Revolving around this main narrative are many subplots and a great cast of characters that are all interrelated and entangled in some way. The subplots help Chesnutt to create a more vivid picture of the life and the common social practices at the time of the novel, while they simultaneously contribute to the development of the main storyline. One example of such a subplot is Sandy Campbell's unjust imprisonment and near lynching. Like the causes of the eventual race riot, Sandy's story slowly builds up over the course of the novel, until it culminates about halfway through the narrative. In both cases, the causes are the same: a fundamental economic and social anxiety of the people of Wellington, racial prejudices and unjust accusations, as well as the white supremacists' belief in a superior race all contribute to Sandy's near lynching, and the eventual violent riot. Andrews notes that, because of its numerous characters and subplots, "[t]he unity of *The Marrow of Tradition* depends chiefly on the political plot and the story of the fortunes of the two families" (179). Furthermore, the subplots allow Chesnutt to weave a mixture of different genres into his novel. For instance, the murder of Mrs. Ochiltree by her white upper-

class relative Tom Delamere brings the element of a crime-story with a highly unexpected resolution to the narrative. There is even space for a romantic element in the form of the love triangle between Clara Pemberton, Tom Delamere, and Lee Ellis. The subplot of the deep and mutual hatred of Captain McBane and Josh Green represents “an episode of injury and revenge”, and finally, the resolution of the family relations of the Carterets and Millers brings an element of “wrong and forgiveness” to the narrative (see Andrews 179).

Besides these numerous subplots, Chesnutt employs yet another literary device to provide his readers with more information about the characters and their interconnectedness, namely the frequent insertion of asides. An aside provides the reader with additional details about a character that the novel’s other characters do not know (see LiteraryDevicesEditors). Generally, this literary technique allows the narrator to briefly hold up the ongoing action of the narrative to insert unrelated information that may be of importance to the story later and enables the reader to better understand the characters’ motivations. Lehman argues that Chesnutt’s “purpose for writing was a means to lead a determined effort against the barriers of prejudice and to promote a human understanding of his characters in the hope that it would be a vehicle for better relations between Black and White Americans” (275).

2.2.5 Thematic concerns

Given the historical background and the dramatic climax of the story, the major theme of *The Marrow of Tradition* is clearly race, and underlying the narrative is Chesnutt’s attempt of a solution to the so-called “Negro problem”. The novel is set in, and was written at, a time that was critical for African Americans. During the time of Reconstruction, they had experienced both unprecedented economic and political opportunities (Lehman 274). However, at the time of the novel, the post-Reconstruction era has already left its traces on the characters, and on the town of Wellington as a whole. As is evident from the narrative, the US South was already governed by segregation, oppression and open violence against African Americans, and southern white politicians were regaining power in local politics, standing in direct opposition to the Republican Party, which was supported by large numbers of black voters (274). Chesnutt’s character General Belmont refers to it as “the age of crowds”, arguing that print technology can be effectively used to affect large groups

of people (*MOT*, 81). As shown in the novel, it was frequently abused to depict African Americans in a most prejudiced and often unjust manner to present them as lawless, dangerous criminals and incite discomfort and even hysteria among the white citizens. The violence of race riots, as shown in the novel, was only one of the most extreme expressions of this public anxiety.

People of mixed race, then, are a symbol of the tensions between whites and blacks in the novel. The best example of this is Janet Miller, the mixed-race half-sister of the white Olivia Carteret. Although both women are described by the novel as resembling each other, Janet regards herself as a black woman and submits herself to the segregation laws. She has suffered from racial harassment all her life and has always been denied acceptance of herself for who she is, namely the relative of one of the most influential white characters in Wellington. Olivia, who gradually and most painfully begins to accept the fact that Janet is, indeed, her half-sister, never manages to fully recognize her equality. Considering this, it is not surprising that in their final confrontation, Janet struggles with her long fostered mixed feelings for her white sister. Nevertheless, she manages to show enough compassion to ask her husband to save Olivia's son.

As William Andrews argues, also historical change and social adjustment are prevalent themes in *The Marrow of Tradition*. As already mentioned, since the abolishment of slavery, the South underwent some dramatic changes, both politically and socially. At the time of the novel, these changes continued to take place, and as Chesnutt wanted to demonstrate with his narrative that both whites and blacks must accept these social and political transitions (Andrews 182) and believed that "[t]he progress of any race is dependent on the advancement of individuals" (Chesnutt qtd. in Andrews 190). Along the same lines, his novel displays many examples of individual characters that show progressive behavior and actions throughout the narrative. Presumably the strongest evidence of progress is given in the person of Dr. Miller, the mixed-race physician who has experienced racial prejudices and disadvantages all his life, and who has watched the burning of his lifework, the black hospital of Wellington, and the death of his son, basically at the hands of Major Carteret. However, he "puts his faith in the gradual amelioration of social injustices" (Andrews 191) and is confident that "the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time" (*MOT*, 65). As the ending of the narrative

shows, despite everything, Miller does not give up but holds on to his humane attitude and, at the request of his wife, saves the Major's son's life. Another example of this progress is the young black nurse who follows Mammy Jane as little Dodie's nurse. Unlike the devoted elderly Mammy Jane, the young nurse is described as standing in "the chip-on-the-shoulder stage" of social development, meaning that she has "neither the picturesqueness of the slave, nor the unconscious dignity of those of whom freedom has been the immemorial birthright" (*MOT*, 42). Owing to her resentment of the subservient attitude of her predecessor and her confident and independent attitude towards her white employers, the young nurse shows that Southern black individuals are "pioneering the social evolution of the race" (Andrews 191). On the other hand, there are also fanatical defenders of the old order. Above all, Captain McBane is probably the most ferocious symbol of repression in the novel, and his primary goal seems to be to never let African Americans forget their former place in society. However, Andrews argues that although the tension between progress and regress is never resolved, the novel suggests an "unmistakably hopeful prognosis [for] the reader" (Andrews 193), with the Millers' decision of helping the Carterets' son. Carteret, on the other hand, is described by the novel as having a "narrow, a but logical" and just mind (*MOT*, 320), and can see the injustice of his request addressed to the doctor. Thus, Andrews claims that his "capacity for empathy with a black man is a realistic enough basis for hope" and a possibility "for eventual racial reconciliation in the New South" (Andrews 195).

Besides the various shades of racial issues in the novel, the subject of class is also a very strong theme of *The Marrow of Tradition*. While the whole narrative depicts how the world in the novel is governed by an interplay of money, class and race, the character of Captain McBane best illustrates his society's issues with class. Although white, the former slave driver has not been considered respectable or equal by his fellows. Even after he had made some post-war money, he has never been able to buy himself into Wellington's society and has always been denied access to the prestigious Clarendon Club. While the white McBane is denied full access to the white upper class based on his lower class heritage, the novel shows how the advancement of a black-middle class creates a different kind of economic anxiety among the old Southern elite like the Carteret family, who has always been respected for their money and estate. This becomes apparent in Olivia's fear of her half-sister's legal claims to her property, and by Tom Delamere's robbery and

eventual murder of Mrs. Ochiltree, for which the innocent black Sandy Campbell is almost lynched. The novel demonstrates how these feelings of displacement of the white community, and mostly of white men, can lead to the violent race riot at the climax of the narrative. Originally incited by Major Carteret, General Belmont and Captain McBane, the riot represents the extreme response to the whites' perceived threat of the advancing African American middle-class. When planning their 'revolution', the three men discuss whom of the black middle-class citizens they were to chase away from Wellington out of a fear that they are taking business away from white professionals. Thus, one could argue that *The Marrow of Tradition* captures the Southern society confronted and struggling with the economic and political changes after the Civil War commonly mistaken as a "Negro problem."

2.3 Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983)

Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* was published in 1983 and was instantly well-received by both his readers and his critics (Abrams 87). After his immensely popular *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) about a female protagonist, Gaines felt the need to write a book about men, which was greatly inspired by his regular visits to the South and his old home state of Louisiana (Shuman 591). During these trips, he frequently encountered elderly old men sitting on their porches and exchanging stories about the old days. As an attentive and interested listener of those stories, Gaines had found his inspiration for his sixth novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*.

2.3.1 About the author

Ernest James Gaines was born in 1933 on a plantation in rural Louisiana. He was the first of 12 children and his father abandoned the family when Gaines was only a small boy. In the hopes of finding work, his mother moved to New Orleans and left her children behind on the plantation in the care of Gaines's great-aunt (Abrams 25; Lowe xvii). "Aunt Teen", as Gaines refers to her, raised him and his siblings, despite her elderly age and her almost life-long paralysis from the waist down, and she had a remarkably strong influence on him as a person and a writer (Abrams 25f.). When

talking about her, Gaines particularly highlights his great-aunt's intelligence, courage and moral strength (Beauford 16f.; Laney 57), all qualities that he would later repeatedly attribute to many of his fictional characters.

Although Gaines began working in the fields to support his family financially at as early an age as 8 years, Aunt Teen had always encouraged him to go to school and do more than just field work (Abrams 25). At the age of 15, he went to California to live with his mother, and attended high school and Junior College, graduating in 1953 and, after two years of military service, enrolled at San Francisco State College (Abrams 42). During his time at college, he started writing and published several short stories. After his graduation, he went back to Louisiana for inspiration for his first novel, *Catherine Carmier*, which was published in 1964 (Abrams 51). *Of Love and Dust* followed in 1967, and his first collection of short stories, *Bloodline* (1968), "put him firmly on the literary map" (Abrams 56). All these works were not as successful as Gaines had wished, and it was not until his fourth novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) that he achieved his literary breakthrough. Highly praised by critics, this novel was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and won the California Gold Medal, among other awards (Lowe xvii; xviii). His remaining three novels, *In My Father's House* (1978), *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), were all very well received and brought Gaines a National Book Critics Circle Award, another Pulitzer Prize nomination as well as the MacArthur Fellowship Award (Abrams 101).

In his writing, Gaines's heritage and upbringing are omnipresent. As John Lowe argues, Gaines is a writer who is "obviously proud of who he is and of the culture that both produced him and inspired his insight" (xiii). All of Gaines's works are set near his own birthplace in rural Louisiana and feature African American characters in challenging life situations (Lowe viii). His writing style pays "meticulous attention to and [privileges] [...] dialogue" (Lowe ix), and his stories feature several recurring issues and themes. Probably the most striking are his characters' deep connection with, and reverence of, the past, and their struggles to deal with the events of their pasts to shed light on the history behind their current problems (Lowe ix). As John O'Brien argues, Gaines tries to "escape the immobile past and view change as necessary in sustaining life" (O'Brien 25). This is also one of the issues dealt with in *A Gathering of Old Men*. Another favorite issue of Gaines's, which, according to Lowe, is present in all his works, is the so-called quest for black

manhood. His male characters are often struggling with the search for their own identity (Lowe xv).

2.3.2 Plot summary

After the Cajun farmer Beau Boutan is shot dead on the grounds of the Marshall Plantation, a group of elderly black men gather around the alleged suspect, 80-year-old Mathu, to take their long overdue stand against both the white sheriff and the expected retribution of the Cajun's feared family. As the day progresses, everyone sits and waits for Fix Boutan and his friends while recalling the horrors of their suppressed pasts, thus somehow justifying why each of the black men has a motive for killing Beau. In the end, it turns out that not Mathu, but his godson Charlie committed the manslaughter, and while Fix respects his family's decision not to strike back, Luke Will and his gang come to Marshall for the final shootout. Both Luke and Charlie are killed, the former receiving what he deserves, the latter dying as a newly found symbol of manhood for his black community.

2.3.3 Time and setting

The novel is set in 1979 in Louisiana on and near Marshall Plantation in Gaines's fictional St. Raphael Parish. Throughout the novel, the former plantation and its grounds are described mainly as deserted and run down, with lots of weeds and only a few inhabitants left, most of whom are either very old people or very young children.

Though most of the story takes place in the quarters on Marshall, some narrative segments are located in the surrounding area, like Fix Boutan's house, Jack Marshall's favorite bar and the football field of Louisiana State University (LSU). The events of the novel cover a time-span of approximately an eight-hour day. However, large parts of the novel are not directly linked to the story of Beau's death and the events that follow it, but are the memories and retellings of the elderly black men's past. Therefore, one could argue that the novel gives an account of a much broader time-span than the single October afternoon that is at the center of the immediate story. The last segment, too, is not part of this storyline, but covers the courthouse-scene sometime after the shootout.

Although the story is set in the late 1970s, Valerie Babb argues that “social conventions change so slowly in Marshall that the novel could have taken place anytime during the period of tenant farming” (113). While the responsibility for, and management of, the plantation has long been in the hands of the white Candy Marshall, everyone in the parish knows that things are really run by the Cajuns, led by Fix Boutan. They have been reigning with terror and fear for a long time, showing no respect for blacks and caring very little about legal limitations. The law, represented in the novel by the white Sheriff Mapes, has traditionally decided to close its eyes and let the Cajuns get away with all their mischievous deeds, and nearly all the blacks have been too passive, and too afraid of standing up against either Anglo American or Cajun. By and by, most of the younger residents have started to move away from Marshall, so that at the time of the novel, the impression is created that the Quarters are inhabited only by old people and children.

While social conventions seem to be at a standstill at Marshall, Karen Carmean notes that the novel also reflects the changing social relationships most dramatically influenced by mechanization and its effects twenty years “after the peak of civil rights activities in the South” (113). With the introduction of tractors to Southern farming, “an entire class of people [had been forced] away from the plantation to make a new livelihood”, and the known social structure underwent significant changes. Cajuns, previously considered not much more than field laborers, gained economic power and claimed acceptance and respect from white Anglos, while considering themselves above blacks (Carmean 113). In the novel, this is highlighted by the conversation between Candy Marshall and Gil Boutan, who accuses Candy of having always considered herself a class above the Cajuns (*GOM*, 122). Through the memories and stories of the elderly black men, the effects of mechanization and the resulting changes for black life on Marshall are dramatized (92). Consequently, at the time of the novel, the gap between whites, blacks and Cajuns is omnipresent and lies at the center of the story.

2.3.4 Structure and narrative technique

The novel is a multi-perspective narrative, divided into 20 segments, each of which is told in the first person by one of the black or white characters living on or near Marshall Plantation. By telling the story through 15 narrators – three voices, that of

Lou Dimes, Snookum and Sully, occur more than once – Gaines accomplishes to present the reader with various points of view on the unfolding action (Babb 114), and encompasses a wide range of narrative voices: “black, white, male, female, young, old, educated, not educated, racist, liberal, and confused” (Carmean 100).

While the choice of first person narration mimics the ever-present oral tradition of the South and generally establishes an intimacy between reader and text, Babb argues that it also brings to light the “composite of racial injustice” the black characters have endured all their lives, while “reveal[ing the white characters’] disbelief and at times begrudging respect for the action these men undertake” (117). The reader gets to know the characters’ consciousness intimately, which, Babb notes, are of a dual nature as the black men “have existed in a world of silent acceptance while dreaming of a world of willful action” (114).

The notion of dual consciousness is most apparent in the headings of each narrative segment, which provide the narrating characters’ two names by which they are known. Babb refers to them as their “formal” and “familiar” names, the first “belong[ing] to the world of official documents, legal access, and civil rights”, while the latter, highlighted with “aka”, represents the “oral” name and “is in keeping with one’s history, one’s characteristics, and one’s essence” (Babb 114f.). As the novel’s story progresses, the reader becomes more and more aware of the characters’ double identities the two names indicate, and their struggle to “seek a comfortable balance between social and personal identity” (114). Though colorful names like “Chimley”, “Rooster” and “Dirty Red” might suggest that, mainly, the black characters suffer from these double identities, it is also a problem that affects the white characters, as they too are “hampered by their written names, which define them as part of a racist system and force them to live by antiquated values” (114). This becomes most apparent in the characters of Jack Marshall and Gil Boutan, the former carrying the burden of the heritage that comes with his family name, the latter struggling to stand up against his own father to stop him from violently revenging his brother’s death as everyone expects, which would destroy Gil’s own athletic career.

Of the 20 chapters, 9 are narrated by the elderly black men, while the rest is divided among characters that are, to a greater or lesser degree, outsiders. As Dennis Abrams and Mary Ellen Doyle note, the progress of the plot is generally not told by those characters most involved in the story, like Mathu, Candy or Charlie (Abrams 76ff.), because it would have been impossible to keep the true killer of Beau

a secret (Doyle, *Voices* 194). Furthermore, Karen Carmean argues that all the narrators with more than one narrative segment “share an ‘outsider’s’ perspective, giving their points of view an emotional distance necessary for credibility” (101). These narrators are the observant and emotionally detached reporter Lou Dimes; the black child Snookum, who adds honesty, curiosity and innocence to his chapters; and Gil Boutan’s friend Sully, who is unaware of the Boutan family’s history and thus narrates his segments in an unprejudiced fashion (Carmean 101f.).

The remaining chapters are narrated by different characters, and while each “has a distinctive voice reflecting the thought processes of the character whose name introduces the chapter”, many of these passages do not revolve around the narrating character, but “allow other[s] to voice their stories”, thus underlining Gaines’s unique talent in rendering character through narrative perspective (Carmean 102).

2.3.5 Thematic concerns

Although *A Gathering of Old Men* might initially create the impression of being a crime-solving story, it soon becomes clear that it is not so much concerned with who killed Beau Boutan, or even why, but centers on the act of the elderly man finally taking a stand against their lifelong white oppressors. Thus, what lies at the thematic heart of the story is the subject of manhood, a recurring issue in Gaines’s works. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, the focus is deliberately and almost exclusively placed on men, and the rare occasions in which women are a part of the narrative frequently serve to underline the weak self-image of the men (Carmean 108). The novel offers several examples of ‘manhood’ so long and badly yearned for by the old men, who “have been denied status as men, primarily because of race” (Carmean 108). Through remembering and sharing their individual stories of humiliation and, for the first time in their lives, standing up against their common white oppressor, the old men finally manage to connect with one another, and, most importantly, also with themselves. They learn that being a man means “demanding recognition of one’s worth [... and] taking responsibility of one’s actions” (Carmean 108). Consequently, they at last earn acceptance and respect not only from Mathu, who has always looked down on them, but also from the white Sheriff Mapes.

Another important theme in the novel is the issue of change. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, change and its consequences are omnipresent. While on the one hand,

change had finally freed the blacks from slavery, it has also brought about mechanization, which consequently led to dramatic changes for the black community of Gaines's Louisiana. These changes are dramatized in the novel with the help of the recurring images of tractors, weeds and cultivated plants, which serve as evidence for making the blacks' life in the South even harder. While the tractor helped to replace huge parts of traditionally black field work, the concept of tenant farming further weakened the black community's role in Southern society by taking away fertile land from them and giving it to the slightly more prestigious Cajuns (Shuman 591f.). Yet, there is also another type of change present in the novel. While the old men, through their remembering and retelling of their lifelong abuse and humiliation, create a picture of a still racist and unchanged South, there is the fact that, against all odds, Fix Boutan finally decides not to revenge Beau's death because two of his sons speak out against it, arguing that "times have changed" (Carmean 109f.). Furthermore, Gil Boutan's promising football career together with his black team mate Cal is another symbol of this social change that is taking place in the South of Gaines's novel, even if the elderly black men, of all characters, deny seeing it, as Mapes points out:

'You told God you wanted Salt and Pepper to get together, and God did it for you. At the same time, you wanted God to keep Fix the way Fix was thirty years ago so one day you would get a chance to shoot him. Well, God couldn't do both.' (GOM, 171)

By the end of the novel, yet another kind of change besides economic and social is hinted at, namely a change in black people's legal status. Initially already implied by Sheriff Mapes, his efforts to protect the people at Marshall and his growing respect for the elderly black men, the courtroom scene and judicial decision at the end of the novel further reinforce the hope that black people will finally be recognized as equal citizens (Carmean 111).

3 Notions of manhood and configurations of masculinity

When Dr. Miller is confronted with the decision of whether to support his black community by joining a physical fight or not in *The Marrow of Tradition*, he admits that “[e]very *manly* instinct urge[s] him to go forward” (*MOT*, 282, emphasis added). While Miller does not offer an explanation as to what these “manly instincts” may be or what, in his view, constitutes “manliness”, a quick consultation of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* yields the following definitions: “manly” means “[to have] the qualities or physical features that are admired or expected in a man”, and “manhood” is described either as “the state or time of being an adult man rather than a boy” or as “the qualities that a man is supposed to have, for example *courage*, *strength* and *sexual power*” (OALD 2005, emphasis added). What exactly, however, is “admired or expected” in a man, what are the qualities that men are “supposed to have,” and does everyone, regardless of their gender and heritage, define manhood in the same way?

As the analysis in this chapter will demonstrate, the notions of “manhood” and “masculinity” provided by the three novels under examination in this thesis are as diverse as the characters that are presented in the books. Furthermore, with the progress of each novel and the progress of society as a whole – from the system of slavery beyond the era of Reconstruction and the post-Civil Rights Movement – also the characters must adapt to the changes surrounding them and must slowly come to terms with newly arising systems and new understandings of masculinity.

The following sections will therefore focus on the different notions of manhood and configurations of masculinity as presented in Jones’s, Chesnutt’s and Gaines’s novels. Due to the high number of characters depicted in each work, I have attempted to cluster similar character types where possible and selected the most significant individual representatives where necessary.

3.1 Knowing how to be a man in *The Known World*

Since the novel unfolds as a genealogy weaving through the generations of history, it contains an overwhelming number of individual stories and characters that are all interlinked. Thus, due to the complexity of *The Known World*, I have narrowed down my analysis of male characters in this section and have tried to group them

depending on how they act on their own notions of manhood. What is striking about the male characters in *The Known World* is that most of them are presented as ultimately failing. Whether wealthy or poor, white or black, free or enslaved, slave-owning or abolitionist, most male characters are depicted as being punished for or tragically failing because of their various character flaws. I would argue that men's ultimate failure in *The Known World* originates from the characters' conscious or unconscious support of a system – i.e. slavery – that is itself doomed to fail. From the abundance of male characters in *The Known World*, I have been able to identify but two male individuals whom the novel eventually depicts as succeeding.

Therefore, the following sections present select characters as power-hungry men who are punished for acting merely upon self-interest; as good intentioned but ultimately failing individuals, and as human beings capable of true love, thus transcending the boundaries of the system that oppressed them.

3.1.1 Power-hungry men and their punishments

Characters like the wealthy white slave owners William Robbins and Robert Colfax, the black slave owner Henry Townsend and his slave Moses, the sheriff's cousin Counsel Skiffington and the white slave patroller Harvey Travis share a common belief in the institution of slavery and the "world of human property" (*TKW*, 34). All these men support the system of slavery and actively use it to gain or increase their own power. They are often depicted as lacking any understanding of opposing views, and usually look down upon anyone who does not possess their world's most valued and defining treasure, namely human property. Indeed, William Robbins suggests that the old Sheriff Patterson is not capable of understanding "what the difficulty is in keeping this world going right" simply because he does not own any slaves himself (38).

In many ways, I read William Robbins as representative of the archetypical white male Southern plantation owner who builds his world and faith solely onto the institution of slavery and works with all his might to uphold it. For Robbins, I would propose, manhood is closely linked to the ownership of other human beings. He builds his own identity solely upon his role as a master, thereby ignoring the fact that his subjectivity as a master can only exist because he objectifies others, thereby

creating a dependence upon the very beings whose independence he denies. As Laura Bieger argues,

[i]n the relation between master and slave, the desire to be recognized by others [...] is defective because the master can only become the master if he subjugates the slave to a status of inferiority; yet at the same time, he needs the recognition of his slave to confirm his [status] as the master, which produces a structural lack in the master's mode of being since he depends on the impaired recognition of someone who is not a full subject. (Bieger 416)

I would further argue that Robbins serves to demonstrate how issues of race are further complicated by issues of class in the novel. Race seems to be less important to Robbins than economic and power relations, which is illustrated by his respect for black slave owners like Fern Elston and Henry while he looks down upon other white men who, for whichever reasons, do not own human property themselves. His apparent indifference to race is further highlighted by the close ties he develops to some of the novel's black characters, specifically his relationship with Philomena and Henry. Although he is aware of the potential social consequences, Robbins falls in love with the slave girl Philomena, whom he eventually frees and builds a "house on Shenandoah Road [...] on the same block with white people" (*TKW*, 21ff.). Their extra-marital affair results in two illegitimate mixed-race children, Dora and Louis, whom Robbins loves dearly. He knows that "the world" – *his* world, in fact – "would not be very good to the children he [had] with Philomena" (121) and is careful to ensure they are educated properly and well-prepared for their future lives (127). While his relationship with Philomena and their children demonstrates that Robbins can love across the color line to a point where he "fear[s] that he [is] losing his mind because of that love" (21), it simultaneously shows that this love does not fit into the world "whose prejudices he works to reinforce" (Wood 1). Although his status as the county's wealthiest man protects him from any social consequences, the novel suggests that the secrecy of the affair and his internal struggles produce in Robbins "a sense of shame which he also keeps a secret" (2), which by and by starts to affect his health. The development of "storms in his head" (*TKW*, 21) increasingly affect his life and mental health (25) but have initially no effect on his reputation as intimidating, powerful and influential. His actions and beliefs are repeatedly shown to have an impact on the whole community of Manchester County. When, for example, his slave Rita escapes, Robbins is convinced that "something threatening [is] loose in the land" (37) and urges the sheriff to implement his idea of "nocturnal aides" to patrol the

county at night (42). Later, when these same slave patrollers molest the free-black teacher Fern Elston, she directs her complaint not to the sheriff but to Robbins, trusting that his influence surpasses even the sheriff's reach – and rightly so, since “[n]o patroller ever abused her again” (131). By the end of the novel, however, Robbins's deteriorating health and increasing conflicts with his adversary, the similarly wealthy Robert Colfax, lead to the virtual collapse of Manchester County. After Henry's mother's death, Robbins and Colfax enter a legal battle over her estate, Robbins on the side of Henry's widow – and, since she married his son Louis, Robbins's by now daughter-in-law – Caldonia; Colfax on behalf of Counsel Skiffington, who eventually loses. In the aftermath of this legal quarrel, the two wealthy white men cease all business relations for good, leaving the county's white population to choose sides. Over time, this feud “help[s] to tear apart the county, so that by [...] 1912, [...] the town of Manchester was the county seat to nobody” and “became the only county in the history of the commonwealth of Virginia to be divided and swallowed up by the other counties” (377). While Robbins's “storms of the head” worsen over time, they seem to be somewhat alleviated by the presence of his second most important cross-racial connection, his devoted groom and protégé Henry.

After Henry's father Augustus buys first his own and then also his wife's freedom, the young slave Henry is left behind alone at the plantation with the promise that “[b]efore [he] can turn around good [...] [he] be comin home with [them]” (*TKW*, 16). Interestingly, the separation from his parents seems to simultaneously mark Henry's separation from his slave community, since beside the slave woman Rita, who takes over the role as surrogate mother for him, the novel never mentions any other ties between Henry and the other slaves, neither adult nor children. The resulting gap between Henry and the slave community is maintained throughout his life. Instead of wanting to make friends among his equals, for instance, the young boy sets out to develop a relationship with his master, William Robbins, who becomes a role model and kind of father figure to him. As a devoted groom and skilled bootmaker, Henry impresses his master, who soon takes a liking to him and ensures that the boy is always well-cared for. Consequently, Henry's experiences as a slave stand in stark contrast to that of many of his fellows, including his parents, and thus sets him further apart from the slave community. As Katherine Bassard observes, Henry “grows up in a system where property relations are recognized above family

relations", leading to a shift of his allegiance from his parents to William Robbins, whose "ownership forges a tie more binding than that between father and son" (Bassard 412). Henry's identity and view of the world are constructed to mirror those of his substitute father Robbins (416), and further dissociate him from his natural father Augustus (412). Over time Robbins's feelings for Henry grow equally strong as for his son Louis (*TKW*, 44), and the white master unexpectedly develops "a kind of love for the boy" (28). He "[comes] to depend on seeing [him] waving from his place in front of the mansion, [comes] to know that the sight of Henry meant the storm [is] over and that he was safe" (27f.). Joseph Cheang interprets this unusual relationship between master and slave as a "blanket that shelters [Robbins] from his marital and health crises" (3), and he argues that Henry's devoted service enables Robbins "to recuperate from his split conscience" created by his affair with a black woman, and "to realize that he is a wholesome master anticipated by his slaves" (3). Consequently, Cheang uncovers Robbins's affection for Henry merely as self-serving, since Henry constitutes an "object" in which Robbins "can find a transient form of security" (3).

Whatever the underlying motivations for their relationship may be, Robbins's preference of Henry ensures that the boy gets to enjoy many benefits his fellow slaves are denied. Robbins "ha[s] his slave shoemaker make the boy something good for his feet", "[tells] the servants [...] that Henry [gets] to eat in the kitchen" and "forever be clothed the right way" (*TKW*, 27). Even after the biological father Augustus finally manages to buy his son free from Robbins, the relationship between the white plantation owner and his former slave continues to grow, arguably reaching its peak when Henry continues to emulate his white role model and decides to own slaves himself. While his natural parents, specifically his father, are shocked and cannot comprehend why their own son, a former slave himself, would want to own anybody, let alone his own kin (137f.), Robbins's influence and care for Henry help him to achieve his goal. Robbins arranges his education under Fern Elston, making sure he knows "how to conduct himself in Virginia" (127), and prepares him for his life as a proper slave master (123ff.).

I would argue that Henry's formative years, in the absence of his parents and in veneration of his master, have led to his belief that to become a man, he must own other human beings. Richard Hardack suggests that "because African Americans were so long deprived of any right to own property, including themselves, some fell

victim to a need to overcompensate and own others" (212). Since Henry had been a "thing of property" all his life, he "[seeks] to redefine himself by using slaves, things of property" to build his own identity (Hardack 214). The distance he – consciously or unconsciously – establishes between himself and his slave community is also reflected in his decision to actively participate in owning others, and it is quite unsurprising that he would view the system of slavery not from the viewpoint of a black slave – as a wicked and unjust system – but rather from a white male perspective, providing him with an opportunity to gain wealth and social status. When he tells his parents about his first purchase, Henry defends himself by claiming that he "ain't broke no law" and that he "ain't done nothin that any *white* man wouldn't do" (TKW, 138, emphasis added). By weighing his actions against the actions of white people, Henry further dissociates himself from his kin and displays his identification with his white master. Bassard argues that in doing so, Henry is "doomed to replicate the social hierarchy that originally oppressed him" (415). Having lived as the object in a subject-object relation all his life, Henry now has the urge to finally become a subject, to become a man, and he thinks the only way to achieve this is by objectifying others (cf. Cheang 2). Given Henry's upbringing, Robbins's promise that "[o]nce you own them, once you own even one, you will never be alone" (TKW, 84) is even more alluring to the young man, and he is determined to become "a better master than any white man" (64). What he fails to see is that "the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word *master*" (64, emphasis in original), and the gap between himself and the African American community, including his own parents, is further widened by the purchase of his first slave, Moses.

Like Henry, Moses, too, is introduced by the novel as an isolated, liminal character who is not well – if at all – integrated in the slave community of his plantation. While he is initially surprised to learn that "a black man, two shades darker than himself, own[s] him and any shadow he [makes]" (TKW, 9), he quickly accepts his fate and refrains from questioning this "strange world" that has already enslaved him since birth and separated him from his childhood love, leaving him emotionally crippled and "detached from any close communal bonds" (Bieger 407). As Henry's overseer, Moses is in a more powerful position than most of his fellow slaves, a fact that is further highlighted by his proximity to his master. His cabin is "the one nearest the house where his master and mistress live[s]" (TKW, 7), and Henry promises him

that “[y]ou be the boss of this place. There’s my word, then my wife’s word, and then there’s your word” (332). Indeed, although in disdain, he is referred to as “Little Marse” by the other slaves (263). David Ikard compares Moses to someone suffering battered person’s syndrome, as he seems “compelled to identify with the oppressor rather than the oppressed” and “heaps the bulk of his furor” on the other slaves (81), who have learned to avoid their unpopular overseer whenever they can. Moses has demonstrated that his loyalty lies with his master and that he is willing to work his fellow slaves long and hard days in the fields regardless of their physical health. Within the slave community that Moses works so hard to distance himself from, everyone knows that he abuses and beats his wife and is not “much of a father” to his son (*TKW*, 263). Instead of connecting with his fellows, the novel repeatedly emphasizes Moses’s connection to the plantation, which to him presents “the only thing in his small world that mean[s] almost as much as his own life” (2). Paul Ardoin identifies Moses’s “local-ness” as his central characteristic, arguing that when he “tastes land tainted by its corrupt use, [...] his goal in life becomes to rearrange his position on the same land. Moses cannot conceive of life outside of the boundaries he knows, so he hopes only to maximize what he can get within the existing boundaries” (645f.). Despite his attempts to follow in his master’s footsteps after his death, Christa Buschendorf argues that Moses is tied to his identity as a field slave to the point that makes him unable to “move beyond his position [...] keep[ing] him in the chains of slavery” and “accepting his existence as it is” (240). Susan Donaldson argues that Moses’s sense of self “is radically divided” (271) since he has been the property of someone else, the object to various subjects, for all his life. Like the development of his master, it is unsurprising that Moses has adopted the same view on how to become a man, on how to finally become a subject himself. Hence, after Henry’s death, Moses’s power as overseer and his unchallenged knowledge of the fields, acquired from working on them his whole life, are not enough anymore. Wanting more power and freedom, he tries to invade a new, unfamiliar yet promising area of Southern life when he starts an affair with his mistress Caldonia in the hopes that she would free him and make him “Mr. Townsend” (*TKW*, 293). What he fails to realize is that he is not equipped to be a plantation owner and slave master. In fact, being the “world-stupid” (15) product of his life experiences, Moses is not even equipped to navigate his way outside the plantation he knows so well. The affair abruptly ends when three slaves, including his wife and son, disappear from the

plantation, leaving Moses with the feeling that “the world ha[s] changed” (330). He decides to run away, but although he “[finds] his way around Caldonia’s plantation with no eyes and even no hands to touch familiar trees”, he fails to find his way outside of it, ironically running even farther south (334f.). Being “trapped by [...] his failing imagination”, Moses “cannot think outside the system of slavery” (Bassard 413) and when his efforts to move up in the world fail, he finds himself even deeper in it than before (Ardoïn 646).

As I have shown in this section, characters like William Robbins, Henry Townsend and Moses share a similar world view and values that constitute their perception of what it means to be a man. They act first and foremost on mere self-interest and strive to increase their own wealth, power and social status in the strictly hierarchical world they live in. Their whole existence seems to be built upon the logic of property, and ultimately, the novel depicts how each character is punished in one way or another for supporting a system that is in itself doomed to fail. Robbins is plagued by his “storms”, resulting from the incompatible situation of loving a black woman while simultaneously running a plantation subjugating black slaves. By the end of the novel, the wealthiest man of the county is only a shadow of his former self, leading to the gradual dissolution of his whole community. Henry embraces the world view of his former white master and is ultimately punished for his support of the wicked system by dying at the age of only thirty-one, leaving behind his legacy of human property in the hands of his widow, who does not know how to proceed from there. Finally, the ultimate downfall of the slave Moses is closely linked to his desire for power and his hopes to advance in, not flee from, the system of slavery. When his hopes are ultimately shattered, he is condemned to spend the remainder of his life on Caldonia’s plantation, maimed and as a social outcast.

3.1.2 Good intentioned individuals who ultimately fail

After the analysis of some of the power-hungry characters in *The Known World*, I now want to focus on some of the more benevolent characters. While they, too, live in the world of human property, or are forced to live in it, they appear to be more reflective of their actions and of the institution of slavery. Throughout the novel, characters like John Skiffington and Barnum Kinsey, who, by definition of their profession as sheriff and slave patroller, actively work to reinforce and uphold the

institution of slavery, are frequently depicted as being torn between doing their jobs and doing what they feel is right. Since they are hesitating to do the right thing, and because they still support a system that is doomed to fail, they are depicted by the novel as eventually failing in their attempts to be good and morally upright citizens, because they are not. Augustus Townsend, on the other hand, belongs in this category not because he works to reinforce the system, but because he fails to understand that simply removing himself physically from the institution of slavery is not enough to make him free.

For a long time, the slave Augustus works hard to buy his freedom by hiring himself out as a carpenter and using some of his earnings to pay his master William Robbins. He is determined to free himself from the system of slavery, which he considers wicked, unjust and terrible, and wants to create his own identity by removing himself from the oppressing system and by leaving his role as someone else's property. I would propose that for Augustus becoming a man means to be free and independent. What is important in this respect is how he achieves to transgress the border from an enslaved object to a free subject. As a skilled craftsman, he creates wooden furniture that "could bring sinners to tears" (*TKW*, 14), and he uses his gift to actively buy his freedom by his own accord. By contrast, he buys freedom *for* his son Henry, who in this respect is rendered inactive. Whereas Augustus consciously makes the decision of freeing himself and his family from slavery, Henry "has freedom bestowed on him" (Bassard 415) and does not actively contribute to being freed. In fact, though he does not know it, Henry's work as a groom and his skills as a shoemaker counteract Augustus's efforts because they raise his buying price (*TKW*, 28). Furthermore, by buying both Mildred and Henry from Robbins, Augustus legally becomes their rightful owner (16f.), which, as Katherine Bassard observes, might even further contribute to Henry becoming a slave owner since "[a]n unfree Henry is not free to imagine a world in which the master-slave power line can be deconstructed or transcended" (415).

After his manumission, Augustus buys a piece of land and builds himself a house "at the western end of Manchester County", from which the "nearest white man with slaves [is] half a mile away" (*TKW*, 15), thereby physically removing himself from the institution of slavery as best as possible. In addition to physically placing himself at *town's end*, Augustus chooses the last name "Townsend" to also psychologically distance himself from the world of human property. This urge to

dissociate himself from slavery is also depicted when his son Henry confesses to have become a slave owner and Augustus throws him out of his house because he “promised [himself] [...] that [he] would never suffer a slaveowner to set foot [in] it” (138). Similarly, whenever Augustus and Mildred visit Henry’s plantation, they refuse to sleep in the master’s house and preferred to “stay in whatever cabin [is] available down in the quarters” (6). On the other hand, however, by becoming Mildred and Henry’s rightful owner, Augustus unconsciously plays right into the hands of slavery. While I think that he buys his family solely out of love and therefore qualifies as a “benevolent slaveowner” (Bassard 413), Augustus still “become[s] entrapped within the confines of the power line” himself, thereby “reinforc[ing] the system [...] by strengthening the line of economic power and property” (415ff.).

The irony of Augustus’s ownership of his wife and son also illustrates how family relations are complicated by property relations in the novel. During the years Augustus and Mildred live free while their son remains at Robbins’s plantation, they accept that they have no right whatsoever to their son, because he is someone else’s property. Even when Henry “[s]ometimes [...] [does] not show up” for their Sunday visits, Augustus refrains from chastising the boy for his misbehavior, because he knows that “he [is] not yet his property” and “beyond his reach” (*TKW*, 18). Bassard notes that “Augustus’s social status as Henry’s father can only be established as his status as his son’s purchaser is secured. It is Augustus’s money, not his genes, that confers on him the legal right to be Henry’s father” (412). By accepting that his son is not yet his, and later also by keeping both Mildred and Henry as his legal property, Augustus, whether consciously or unconsciously, accepts and acts within the boundaries of slavery. Despite his inherent desire to turn his back on the world of human property forever, Augustus fails to realize that on some levels, he still adheres to its rules, which first and foremost value property relations above family relations.

Ten years after purchasing Mildred, Augustus finally manages to also buy his now 19-year-old son free from Robbins. When they pick up Henry, the slave woman Rita uses their wagon to escape from the plantation and begs them to help her. Although Augustus initially rejects because he is afraid to get caught and be sent back into slavery, he eventually takes Rita home, and builds a box to disguise her as a delivery of his walking sticks. While working on hiding the woman within the box, Augustus is “surprised at the ease of how he work[s], no trembling of the hands, as if he had been born just to put a woman in a box and send her to New York” (*TKW*,

48). After Henry's death, the novel reveals that the Townsends' house is full of "hidden compartments [...] designed to hide slaves for the Underground Railroad" (376f.). Thus, I would suggest that the Rita incident represents the first of many volitional acts of Augustus and Mildred to help slaves escape to freedom and reveals their active yet secret fight against slavery. By accepting the boundaries of slavery by thinking in terms of property and ownership when it comes to his enslaved son, yet at the same time trying to undermine them by participating in the abolitionists' movement, Augustus is destined to fail. Despite all his attempts, he fails to cut all ties to slavery by remaining in Manchester County instead of moving to the North, and by becoming the legal owner of his wife and son, who are "listed forever in the records of Manchester as his [...] property" (16). Furthermore, while he himself tries to bend the boundaries of slavery by helping slaves escape, Augustus underestimates that the same boundaries might also be bent to his own detriment. Merely a month after his son's death, the brutish slave patrollers eat his free papers and, in a wicked act, sell him back into slavery (213f.). This time, he rejects to submit himself to this fate and "turn[s] and head[s] north" but is immediately shot and dies within minutes (346). By rejecting slavery merely on a personal level, Augustus "imagine[s] he can live freely within a larger space coded toward enslavement and left fundamentally intact" but fails to realize that more needs to be done than to "resid[e] within the larger boundaries of a county that need not respect his personal boundaries" (Ardoin 643).

Another character who fits into the category of good-intentioned men destined to fail is John Skiffington, who, similarly to Augustus, mistakenly believes that he can live within a system he himself has long ago sworn off. As the county's sheriff and a highly religious man, Skiffington "ha[s] no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going, an institution even God himself had sanctioned throughout the Bible" (*TKW*, 43). Besides William Robbins, the sheriff represents another "nonblack influential figure" demonstrating how a "leadership position [...] comes with responsibilities and privileges" (Chukwumah 98). His personal conviction not to own slaves stands in extreme contrast to his main duty as the sheriff to protect the slave owners' property (*TKW*, 39f.). The novel shows that, for as long as he can, Skiffington "is holding together a flawed world of his own", letting wealthy white men dictate the law, his own slave patrollers violate the law, and arguing his way around his self-installed laws (Ardoin 638). For David Ikard, Skiffington represents the "metaphorical embodiment of white hegemonic manhood" (70). While he considers

himself morally superior to other white men because of his strong religious beliefs, the novel tragically shows how little “Skiffington’s practices of white hegemonic male power” differ from his peers’ (Ikard 76). When John and his wife Winifred are given a slave girl as a wedding present, they both reject the idea of keeping her as a slave yet are also unwilling to free her because of “what their neighbors might say [...]”: John Skiffington, once a good man, but now sidling with the outsiders, and northern ones at that” (*TKW*, 34). They decide to keep the girl Minerva after all and talk themselves into believing they could treat her like a family member. However, in a “world [that does] not allow them to think ‘daughter’”, they cannot escape the influence of Manchester County’s prevailing attitudes. As Christa Buschendorf argues, “[o]nly three years [later] the Skiffingtons [...] act in compliance with the implied assumptions of the system” (233), viewing Minerva as “a kind of pet” (*TKW*, 166), having her serve in the house and not allowing her to be taught how to read (280). When Minerva is fifteen, Skiffington starts to “think of her in a different way” (165), and while he knows that “many a white man [...] had taken black women as their own”, the only thing that keeps Skiffington from raping the girl is his belief that “God, who had married him to Winifred [...] would abandon him if he took Minerva” (308). Though Skiffington struggles to steer clear from his peers’ proprietary attitude, the way he views “access to African American women’s bodies as a white male entitlement and African American women as willing sexual participants” (Ikard 77) exposes the sheriff’s “distorted white vision” (78) and presents him as “the perfect example of seemingly noble intentions gone awry” (Ardoin 650). His whole life is built on the concepts of truth and justice, yet he fails to see that the very laws he tries to uphold are neither truthful nor just (650). Consequently, his misfortune “is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement” (Chukwumah 98). His tragic fate, it seems, is sealed when he sets off to confront Henry’s mother Mildred Townsend about the whereabouts of the runaway slave Moses towards the end of the novel. He is accompanied by his morally corrupt cousin Counsel, plagued by a bad tooth and the thought that “[e]verything [is] coming apart” (*TKW*, 339). When he eventually runs out of patience, he shoots Mildred dead, declaring that “[n]o nigger will stand between [him] and [his] duty” (365), at last proving that he is incapable of upholding justice in this inherently unjust system. In his last living moments before he himself is shot by Counsel, Skiffington shows that he cannot provide the black inhabitants of Manchester with justice, simply because he, too,

views them through the lens of white male hegemony as nothing more than inferior property.

The last character I want to analyze in this category is saved from being such property himself “only by the color of his skin”. Barnum Kinsey, “the poorest white man in the county” (*TKW*, 42), is one of Skiffington’s slave patrollers and has been “treading water all his life” (373). While he is described as good-hearted, caring and benevolent and tries to speak out on behalf of mistreated and abused slaves and free black people, he seems to forever fail in his attempts to do the right thing. His existence at the very bottom of the social hierarchy in Manchester County renders him helpless in the illegal sale of Augustus Townsend back to slavery conducted by his colleagues Harvey Travis and Oden Peoples. Plagued by this incident and knowing no other way how to cope with it, Barnum succumbs to his old drinking habits. Weeks have passed when he eventually finds the courage to “tak[e] the nigger side” (217) and tell Sheriff Skiffington about the sale, thereby demonstrating that despite his obvious flaws, he manages to maintain an uncorrupted conscience and a sense of justice that, as the novel reveals, even surpasses that of his boss. While Skiffington ponders whether the incident was unlawful, Barnum, as the only white character in the novel, truly “see[s] African American humanity” (Ikard 73). Barnum is labelled “white trash”, and thus, as Ikard argues, he is “not fully privy to the socioeconomic spoils of white hegemonic manhood”, which causes a “white dilemma” within him: on the one hand, he is capable of “[identifying] on an emotional level with African American humanity and suffering”, but can on the other not “productively reconcile his deep investment in white supremacy [...] with his moral imperative to treat African Americans humanely” (Ikard 71f.). Barnum gives voice to this internal struggle when he relates the incident to Skiffington:

[Augustus] was a free and clear man, and the law said so. [...] But tellin you don’t put me on the nigger side. I’m still on the white man side, John. I’m still standin with the white. [...] It’s just that there should be a way for a body to say what is without somebody sayin he standin on the nigger side. A body should be able to stand under some ... some kinda light and declare what he knows without retribution. There should be some kinda lantern, John, that we can stand under and say, ‘I know what I know and what I know is God’s truth,’ and then come from under the light and nobody make any big commotion bout what he said. He could say it and just get on about his business, and nobody would say ‘He be stickin up for the nigger, he be stickin up for them Indians.’ [...] A man could stand under that light and tell the truth. (*TKW*, 303)

The “lantern of truth” that Barnum longs for reflects his yearning to reconcile the “twoness” of his gendered racial identity (Ikard 72). Like Augustus, who wants to create a safe space free of slavery for himself and his family, and Skiffington, who believes to have found a safe space in God, Barnum wants to have a safe space that allows him to speak up against the “lie of [the] white discourse” whenever necessary, while keeping his white male body and social privileges intact (Ikard 72f.). After the murders of Mildred Townsend and Sheriff Skiffington, Barnum and his family leave Virginia behind to set off to a fresh start in Missouri, where his wife has family (*TKW*, 374). After Barnum’s death along the way, his son Matthew makes a very symbolic tombstone for his father:

He began with his father’s name on the first line, and on the next, he put the years of his father’s coming and going. Then all the things he knew his father had been. Husband. Father. Farmer. Grandfather. Patroller. Tobacco Man. Tree Maker. [...] The boy filled up the whole piece of wood and at the end of the last line he put a period. His father’s grave would remain, but the wooden marker would not last out the year. The boy knew better than to put a period at the end of such a sentence. Something that was not even a true and proper sentence, with subject aplenty, but no verb to pull it all together. A sentence, Matthew’s teacher back in Virginia had tried to drum into his thick Kinsey head, could live without a subject, but it could not live without a verb. (*TKW*, 374f.)

I would propose that Barnum’s tombstone is an analogy of his life. While he occupies various subject positions, he forever fails to fill these roles with proper actions and is incapable of standing up for his beliefs out of fear to lose his privileges as a white man. Instead, he desires a safe space that allows him to act ethically while remaining socially dominant, being at the same time morally awake and intentionally ignorant to the injustices towards African Americans. He fails to see that such a space can never be realized within the world of human property, because “white supremacy depends parasitically on denying African-American humanity” (Ikard 73).

As this section has shown, although characters like Augustus Townsend, John Skiffington and Barnum Kinsey have arguably better intentions than the power-hungry individuals introduced in the previous section, the novel still depicts them as ultimately failing. I would argue that these characters fail to look beyond their own horizons and display a certain – deliberate or unintentional – blindness towards the overall system they live in. They all try, in their own unique ways, to create their own little world within the existing world of human property: Augustus by moving to the edge of the county, Skiffington through his strong religious belief, and Barnum

through his alcoholism. What they all fail to see is that their own little “safe spaces”, their “acts of resistance” are not enough and have literally no effect on slavery (Bassard 416). Augustus’s vision of living as a free man while remaining in a society which is based upon the ownership of his own kin is tainted from the beginning and claims his own freedom and life in the end. Skiffington’s view of manhood is to follow the will of God, but he falls short and is unable to reconcile the laws of slavery with justice. Finally, Barnum’s utopian desire to be just and fair without compromising the social benefits of being a white man can never become reality within the unjust and unfair system of slavery.

3.1.3 Loving human beings transcending boundaries

In the previous sections, I have shown how many of the male characters’ actions in *The Known World* lead to their ultimate failure. While power-hungry individuals like Robbins, Henry and Moses act merely out of self-interest and without any consideration for their communities, more benevolent characters like Augustus, Skiffington and Barnum try to reconcile their perception of manhood with their view of justice and fairness for the community. However, as demonstrated, both groups of characters’ attempts are flawed, and they are eventually either punished for their self-serving behavior or fail to create their desired safe spaces because they choose not to see slavery as the doomed system it is. In this final section, I now want to introduce two male characters who are depicted by the novel as truly transcending boundaries. I read Elias Freeman’s and Stamford Crow Blueberry’s notions of manhood not as based upon owning other people, but as based upon loving and caring for others, which allows them to live more freely than any of the other male characters in *The Known World*.

Like Augustus, Elias’s urge to be free is quite strong from the beginning. In his earlier days on Henry’s plantation, he is depicted as constantly rebelling against oppression, often resulting in his refusal to work and attempts to run away. No matter the setback or how harsh the punishment, his strong will does not falter and his mind is set on his goal to escape the system of slavery, to be his own man and not to be owned by someone else (*TKW*, 87). His intentions of running away subside immediately when he falls in love with the physically challenged Celeste, and he experiences “a quietness and stillness in the world he “ha[s] never known before”

(98). While his love for her ties Elias ever closer to the plantation with “not a chain in sight” (102) and he seems to give up trying to escape, Sarah Mahurin Mutter argues that it simultaneously creates an “alternative hierarchy” for him, where his children “supersede his master” and where he gains a “new sense of humanity [...], of personhood rather than thingness” and a more “humanized understanding of ‘belonging’” (Mahurin 129ff.). In other words, his love for Celeste and their children creates a new identity for Elias the slave, who now becomes Elias the husband and father, and it changes his view of the world: where there was only the urge to physically escape from slavery, Elias’s mind is now liberated. He has a new focus in life, namely to care for his family, and even though his body is now more bound to the system of slavery than ever, the mindset of Elias “Freemen” – the last name his family will choose after the abolishment of slavery – is already liberated and transgressing physical boundaries. While Paul Ardoin argues that Elias’s “metaphorical resistance of love with Celeste [...] plays right into the hands of power” and “benefits no one but his own family unit” (649f.), Christa Buschendorf observes that “[i]t is not submission to the domination of slavery but to the power of love that [...] keeps him bound on the plantation [...] [and] humanizes him and frees him from being chattel” (242f.). She further argues that while “[t]he kind of checked resistance Elias practices turns him into a man of integrity, it does not challenge the institution of slavery” (Buschendorf 243). Nevertheless, while Moses tries to escape slavery by becoming the new master, and Augustus by physically removing himself to the edge of the county while remaining mentally entrapped within the world of human property, it is the continuously enslaved Elias whose “generations [...] [will] be legion in Virginia” (*TKW*, 351).

While the love for his family creates a “whole world” for Elias (Mahurin 142), his hatred for Moses causes the exact opposite. Elias disagrees with Moses’s ruthless style of overseeing, and when Celeste miscarries their fourth child because she is forced to work in the fields, Elias’s hatred for the overseer reaches its peak. After the disappearance of four slaves, including Moses, Elias becomes the new overseer (*TKW*, 349) and is depicted as briefly enjoying his new, powerful position. “He [feels] himself in charge of the place now, and that meant his family, certainly not the children, [will] not have to slave away” (336f.). His participation in the search for the missing slaves, however, brings him back to reality and he realizes again “just where he [is] in the world” (373). While Augustus Townsend is able to buy freedom

for himself and his family by selling his skillfully carved wooden masterpieces, Elias Freeman produces only “the crudest and ugliest instruments in the history of the world” (99) and remains a slave. Yet, by the end of the novel, the Townsend family is dead, while the Freeman’s family line outlives slavery and the Civil War, thriving and prospering with descendants (351f.).

From a young age onwards, Stamford’s notion of manhood has been shaped by a fellow slave’s advice that “the way for a man to survive slavery [is] to always have a young woman, ‘young stuff’ [...] close by” (*TKW*, 57). Afraid of the prospect of “[dying] a horrible death in slavery” (57), Stamford becomes known on Henry’s plantation as “the seeker of young stuff” (61), restlessly “recycl[ing] his women [...] lest they ripen into ‘old stuff’” and becoming increasingly difficult whenever a relationship ends without a new one in sight (Mahurin 128). I would suggest that for Stamford, the objectification of women as ‘young *stuff*’ and the urge to surround himself with them, apparently without the necessity of having actual romantic feelings for them but viewing them merely as something he could “wrap [himself] up” in wintertime (197), provides him with some sense of permanence. For him, young women are “a symbol of trustworthiness, of dependability” (Mahurin 140) that is otherwise hard to come by as a slave. When he dreams of his childhood one night, he wakes up terrified because he cannot even remember the names of his parents. Growing up and living as an object in the world of human property, in which anyone can be sold away at any given moment, concepts like parenthood and family have never been priorities for Stamford and are thus not viewed by him as solid. He muses that “if he had thought of them more throughout his life”, maybe he would have been able to remember their names now (*TKW*, 192). It is not until he “imaginatively convert[s] them to solid objects” (Mahurin 197), mentally taking them “in his hands and put[ting] them all about the plantation where he had last seen them” that he can slowly think of their names again. “[H]is mother’s name was June [...] [and] just before dawn he [awakes] and [says] into the darkness, ‘Colter’” (*TKW*, 193). It is quite unsurprising, then, that during the periods of time between lovers, Stamford feels uncertain and unstable, as if “he was not long for the world”, feeling that “no young stuff would ever love him again” (197). The other slaves have learned to avoid Stamford during these phases as he gets increasingly aggressive and quarrelsome, and the children entertain themselves with rumors that Stamford “ha[s] sworn off all human food” and is now living off rusty nails and muddy water (197). Mahurin argues

that “[w]ithout his ‘young stuff’, Stamford is reduced to a sort of animality” (129), and during a particularly hard breakup, he even loses his will to live, praying to God to “take [him] on home. Or spit [him] down to hell, [he doesn’t] care anymore. Just take [him] away from this” (*TKW*, 200). His humanity and his will to live are “restored only through the experience of [...] love” (Mahurin 129), first in the form of his concern for the plantation’s hungry children during a particularly heavy thunderstorm (*TKW*, 201), later when he develops real feelings for Delphie, the mother of one of Stamford’s former young stuff. Through a near death experience during the thunderstorm, Stamford the emotionally numb slave transforms into Stamford Crow Blueberry, who, as the novel reveals, “[goes] on with his wife to [establish] the Richmond Home for Colored Orphans” (205). He realizes that by helping and caring for his community rather than by exploiting his young stuff, he can create an identity for himself. The last name he chooses closely ties him to the life-changing event of the thunderstorm, in which he witnesses how lightning strikes a tree and kills three crows while he himself is collecting blueberries for some of the plantation’s kids. Witnessing the change from the seeker of young stuff to a caring individual, Delphie eventually gives Stamford a chance, arguably the first chance of real love in his life. Similar to how love for his family transcends Elias, love for Delphie and love and care for his community enable Stamford to literally and metaphorically “survive slavery”.

3.2 Traditions of manhood in *The Marrow of Tradition*

Leaving Jones’s *The Known World*, Virginia, and, in fact, the system of slavery, we will now jump forward in time into the late nineteenth century. After the American Civil war, the abolishment of slavery led to the liberation of about four million former African American slaves in the American South. What followed was the era of Reconstruction, which established African American civil rights, ensured them protection from their former white masters, and enabled them to receive formal education. By the end of the 1870s, however, it became clear that Reconstruction had failed, with disastrous consequences for African Americans living in the South. Without the protection of federal troops, they were now left more or less at the mercy of the white population, who felt their superiority increasingly threatened by an emerging class of educated African Americans. Consequently, new laws were

established that prohibited African Americans from voting, restricted their movement and once again put some of them under involuntary servitude, disguised as convict leasing and sharecropping (see Robinson 98).

Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* is set in precisely this time at the turn of the nineteenth century, and painfully demonstrates that the abolishment of slavery had not changed the white supremacist mindset of many of the novel's white male characters. Set in the deeply segregated Wellington, North Carolina, a fictionalization of Wilmington and its infamous "white supremacist massacre and political coup in [...] 1898" (Fraser 363), the white male society of *The Marrow of Tradition* is no longer governed by the idea of owning human property but defines itself by a complex construct of economic classes. Parallel to these, the novel suggests the increasing emergence of various classes of African Americans, ranging from the lower working class to a new generation of African American middle-class professionals. As *The Marrow of Tradition* illustrates, the advancement of African American men creates deep-rooted fears among many of its white male characters and leads to a revitalization of wide-spread white supremacist ideology. The atmosphere in the novel is characterized by these rising tensions between its white and black protagonists, and the readiness to use violence is growing on both sides.

The following sections will examine selected male characters from *The Marrow of Tradition* and will identify several types of manhood they represent. Starting with four prominent white male characters, the subsequent analysis will reveal white supremacist thinking as the main influencing factor of the continuous decay of Southern aristocracy. Conversely, the second section will show how the rise of a new generation of both white and black middle-class characters gives way of slowly replacing outdated notions of white aristocratic ideals. Finally, the last section will focus on both socially and economically less fortunate characters and show how their experiences living as oppressed African Americans in the South influence their beliefs and willingness to take action.

3.2.1 White male hysteria and the decay of Southern aristocracy

For *The Marrow of Tradition*'s white male characters like Major Philip Carteret, General Belmont, and Captain George McBane, the idea of manhood is exclusively reserved for white men. Moreover, coming from old aristocratic families, Carteret and

Belmont perceive manhood as closely tied to the concept of being a gentleman, and they often use the terms “white man” and “gentleman” synonymously (*MOT*, 73). Coming from the upper class, they consider themselves superior not only to African Americans in general, but also to white people of a lower social and economic standing. They are, however, capable of recognizing hard and honest work, for instance in the character of Lee Ellis, who grew up in poor conditions but “possess[es] sufficient cleverness and tact to make him excellent company” (140). At the same time, their political views compel them to cooperate with “w’ite trash” (36) like Captain McBane, a “socially unfit [...], illiterate and vulgar white man of no ancestry”, who nonetheless has the needed “wealth and energy” (87) to further their white supremacist agenda.

The atmosphere vividly captured throughout the novel is characteristic of post-Reconstruction white “male hysteria of racial violence” (Sundquist 425), which describes white men’s feelings of displacement evoked by the emergence of an educated professional African American middle-class. After the abolishment of slavery, many Southern white men feared the end of their economic and social domination and the rise of what they perceived as “Negro domination”. As Eric Sundquist observes, “[m]ale hysteria [...] was about votes and the loss of white southern virility” (8). Major Carteret’s ambition as a Southern white man of this time is to “vindicate the supremacy of his race, and make the state fit for his son to live in” (*MOT*, 92). As the novel progresses, Carteret’s extreme racist beliefs are disclosed bit by bit. As one of the novel’s most influential white characters and head of the “Big Three”, Carteret is the editor of his party’s “leading organ [...] and the most influential paper in the state” (2), the *Morning Chronicle*. He uses this public platform to exert what Katja Kanzler identifies as “control of textuality [to] establis[h] the social reality of race” (350), and to promote the Big Three’s belief “in the divine right of white men and gentlemen” (*MOT*, 34). Over months, they work together to instigate a revolution of white men, a backlash with the goal of strengthening white manhood by further emasculating black manhood. By taking away African American rights, denying their social equality, impeding their education and pushing them to the fringe of society, white men can exert their perceived superior masculinity once again over a “race [...] [that is] morally undeveloped, and only held within bounds by the restraining influence of the white people” (181).

Though each member of the Big Three displays “discrete perspectives and degrees of racism” (Barton 31), at the core, Carteret, Belmont and McBane share the same sentiments towards the African American community. The Captain’s view, however, is arguably the most radical since he wants to simply get “rid of ‘em all” (*MOT*, 87) while Carteret and Belmont are willing to accept people of color as long as they remain in the inferior, servile role imposed on them by whites. The “traditional negro” (59), the “faithful, docile, respectful and self-respecting” servant (181) who “knows his place” and is “content with the face and place assigned to him by nature” (87) is welcomed by a kind of paternalistic attitude. In fact, until the very end of the novel, Carteret shows no sign of respect or sympathy for any of the black characters with only two exceptions. Of his wife’s old nurse, the ever loyal and subservient Mammy Jane, he “think[s] a great deal” and even promises “protection and succor” if she should ever need it (44). Jane’s grandson Jerry Letlow, who works in the *Chronicle* offices, is tolerated by Carteret as a servant, but he considers him a fool and is disgusted by his “lack of moral principle” (246).

Only at the very end of the novel is Carteret able to briefly glimpse beyond his white supremacist prejudices and see “things as they [are], in their correct proportions and relations” (*MOT*, 321). When circumstances he himself helped create force him to seek the help of the black Dr. Miller, Miller rejects his request because his own son was killed in the violent riot the Big Three helped instigate. This time, Carteret can see the “pure, elemental justice” (321) of his situation. He understands and accepts Miller’s decision and cannot stop himself from involuntarily admiring the black man for “[holding] the power of life and death and [...] use it, with strict justice, to avenge his own wrongs” (321). While Carteret enthusiastically operates in the background, using his newspaper to fuel racial tensions in the public, he is shocked by the eventual outbreak of violence and condemns the “white mob thirsting for black blood” (298). In contrast to McBane, who is eager to join the “madness”, the major “prefer[s] that any violence, however justifiable, should take place without [his] active intervention” (183). His meager attempts to stop the ongoing “murder and arson” of the riot fail (305), and the novel’s violent climax shows that racism works like a “weed [whose] roots remai[n], deeply imbedded in the soil, to spring up and trouble a new generation” (269). As P. Jay Delmar argues, however, “Chesnutt [...] sows the seeds of [...] change in Carteret’s attitude, for the editor [...] seems genuinely affected by the loss of Miller’s son” (271). Furthermore, while he initially claims that he is “not

responsible for [the] horrors” of the riot and “wash[es] [his] hands of them” (*MOT*, 307), he later acknowledges “[t]he burden of his own responsibility”, which “weigh[s] heavily upon him, and [can] not be shaken off” (314). Despite his openly racist, fanatically white supremacist views, I would argue that the novel’s open ending suggests that Carteret’s “narrow, but [...] logical mind” (320) might be capable of true change, after all.

To further challenge the Big Three’s unflinching belief in an inherently superior white manhood, Chesnutt puts the privileged young aristocrat Tom Delamere at the center of the novel’s lynch plot. In contrast to his grandfather, the “apex of an ideal aristocrat development”, Tom is described as a morally lax gambler and trickster and represents “a type of the degenerate aristocrat” (*MOT*, 95). His physical appearance is depicted as unmanly, “feline”, conveying “no impression of strength” and “subtly negat[ing] the idea of manliness” (16), and his personality is described as hypocritical and cowardly (97). Delamere delivers the final proof that not all whites are superior by committing the robbery and murder of his own aunt, which leads to the near-lynching of an innocent black man. By pretending to be the black Sandy, Delamere stages to commit the South’s “unpardonable sin” (303) in which a black man attacks a white woman. Believing the culprit to be black, Carteret identifies the crime as “a murderous and fatal assault upon a woman of our race, – upon our race in the person of its womanhood”, which calls for a punishment “with swift and terrible directness”, or else, he fears, “the whole white womanhood of the South is in danger” (182). The true murderer, a “brute in the lowest human form”, who causes the subsequent peak of white hysteria and violence in Wellington, however, is soon exposed as Tom Delamere, the supposed exemplary representative of the major’s “heaven-crowned Anglo-Saxon” (185). I would argue that this scene illustrates in an ironical way that the threat which causes the white male hysteria in the novel actually stems from within white aristocracy and manhood itself, and that Tom Delamere serves as the prime example of the decline of white manhood. Contrary to the Big Three’s belief, it is not the “burly black brute” (233) that white men need to fear, but the unnoticed decay of white aristocracy and the relegation of their own supposedly superior race from within. When the aristocratic grandfather, Old Mr. Delamere, finds out that his grandson committed the crime and confronts the major with the truth of this “bad affair” (227), Carteret fears that “[e]ven the negroes [will] have a laugh on them” and that “[t]he reputation of the [white] race [is] threatened” should the public

ever learn of the real criminal (228). Consequently, the frantic concealment of the true murderer, a so-called white gentleman, depicts a desperate attempt at disguising the continuing decline of Southern white manhood.

3.2.2 The advancement of new middle-class gentlemen

A somewhat more hopeful perspective on Southern white manhood is presented by Lee Ellis, who represents the professional white middle-class in *The Marrow of Tradition*. The son of a Quaker who had no love for slavery, yet fought in the war on the side of the Southerners (cf. *MOT*, 217), Ellis displays similarly ambiguous character traits. He works as the right hand of Major Carteret at the *Morning Chronicle*, but although he “shar[es] in a general way the Southern prejudice against the negro” (217), he does not hold the extreme racial and political views of his boss and the Big Three. This, I would propose, causes a similar discrepancy between Ellis’s professional and private life as the analysis of Jones’s Sheriff John Skiffington revealed in the previous chapter.

Ellis is liked by most of the novel’s other characters. Although he is not considered “one of the best ‘quality’” (*MOT*, 29), he is recognized as a gentleman not for his wealth or ancestral status, but for his “inner nobility” (Wise 168). In contrast to Captain McBane, Ellis knows how to conduct himself in Wellington’s society, and, as Rachel Wise observes, understands that “knowledge and tact constitute an increasingly valued form of capital” (165). Although the Captain has “money enough to buy out half a dozen [...] aristocrats” (*MOT*, 82), he is simply “not good enough to be recognized as a social equal” (158). The financially inferior Ellis, on the other hand, is considered a “gentleman whom it is an honor to know” (221). Belonging to neither the aristocrats nor the poor whites, I would suggest that Ellis occupies a kind of outsider status, “unbiased from ancestral traditions” (95), which allows him to be very observant and accurate about his perception of other characters. This is best exemplified by his observations about Tom Delamere as a “degenerate aristocrat” (95) at a point in the novel where most of the other characters are still deceived by Tom’s manipulative charm. In contrast to Tom, Ellis is described as an honest young man “with the best intentions in the world” (172), who bears “no element of the sneak” and “[does] not shrink from a fair fight” (19). Unlike many of the other male characters in the novel, Ellis does also not shy away from assuming responsibility.

Although he initially testifies to have seen the black servant Sandy near the murdered Mrs. Ochiltree's house, he feels "a sudden sense of responsibility growing upon himself" (216) when he learns that Sandy will be lynched for the crime.

As the day wore on, Ellis's personal responsibility for the intended *auto-da-fé* bore more heavily upon him. Suppose he had been wrong? He had seen the accused negro; he had recognized him by his clothes, his whiskers, his spectacles, and his walk; but he had also seen another man, who resembled Sandy so closely that but for the difference in their clothes, he was forced to acknowledge, he could not have told them apart. (*MOT*, 217)

By not letting himself be blinded by racial bias, Ellis's doubt about what he really saw slowly leads him to recognize Tom Delamere as the true murderer, and he responsibly decides to "do his duty" to save Sandy, "let it cost him what it might" (*MOT*, 219). It is important to note, however, that he helps to stop the lynching without revealing Tom; in fact, it is Old Mr. Delamere who identifies his grandson as the murderer. As Rachel Wise notes, uncovering the truth is more important to Ellis than any political statement, which "gives him the appearance of an [...] authoritative and honorable professional" (166). The ambiguity of his character, I would suggest, lies in his successful ascent to a position and recognition as a "young progressive" gentleman of the New South (Zogas 155), while at the same time he fails to act upon his liberal political and racial beliefs.

On the one hand, Ellis is depicted as a representative of the ascending professional middle-class of the post-Reconstruction South, and therefore as a sign of an optimistic future. To Wise, Ellis's continuous efforts to remain neutral by withholding compromising knowledge illustrate a very effective "brand of understated power" (158). Although he is romantically interested in the major's half-sister Clara Pemberton, Ellis repeatedly refrains from using his knowledge of his rival Tom's misconducts against him to enhance his own chances. Instead, he keeps silent and patiently witnesses the young aristocrat's self-destruction, thereby "control[ling] the rivalry at a higher cognitive level" and "maintaining the appearance of neutrality" (Wise 168). Although Ellis "ha[s] neither the family nor the means to make him a suitable match for the major's sister" (*MOT*, 141), the novel suggests that in the end Clara chooses him after Tom's social downfall. Wise interprets this "sexual conquest [...] as a signifier of [the] social and cultural power" (169) of Ellis and the professional middle-class he represents. Ellis's power, then, is not built upon descent, wealth or

physical superiority, but upon “knowledge and quiet maneuvering within [...] social structures” (169).

On the other hand, the novel repeatedly depicts Ellis as refusing or being unable to act, and thus as not challenging the boundaries set by more powerful white men (cf. Mohr 424). Instead, he “defer[s] to the views of older men, and [is] satisfied to remain in ignorance of anything which he might disapprove” (*MOT*, 237). Although he is opposed to the lynch law, he does not speak out against it publicly, and although he is “horror-stricken” by the violence of the riot at the end of the novel, he neither condemns it publicly, nor finds a way to “do something” (311) to stop the “deplorable affair” (291). For Todd McGowan, Ellis’s inability to act is typical of “the fecklessness of the white liberal” and demonstrates a “loss of agency”. Ellis’s “opposition [...] never manifests itself in his behavior, because [he] never allows his private feelings [...] to affect fully his public personality” (McGowan 67). Thus, whether consciously or not, he “create[s] a false rift between public and private in order to insulate [himself] from actions” (68) and cannot “think of [himself] as [...] agent in the world” (67). Though Ellis moves to Wellington “to seek a place for himself in the world of action” (*MOT*, 217), he does not act upon his true beliefs but keeps silent instead. He thereby shows a destructive racial loyalty which “assumes the existence of a better form of race relations that can emerge without the active engagement of whites” (Zogas 155). In this respect, Ellis supports a “pessimistic vision of an ongoing white supremacy” (Wise 157) and, as I would argue, shares an ideology similar to Dr. Miller, trusting that “only time, rather than [...] active engagement, will solve the [race] problem” (Zogas 155).

Although Dr. William Miller, too, refrains from speaking out publicly against white oppression, I still propose that Chesnutt uses him to demonstrate how the conditions for African Americans in the South are changing. As the town’s doctor for the black community, Miller establishes himself within Wellington’s society, and, as Janet Mohr observes, proves “that by gradual accumulation of wealth and status black people could retain their identity” and “facilitat[e] gains in social experience that would permit long-term sustainability” (441). Having grown up as a free African American in the third generation, his family’s wealth enabled Miller to enjoy a liberal education in medicine in the North and in Europe. When he returns to the South, he is “secretly conscious that in point of skill and knowledge he [does] not suffer by comparison of any other physician in the town”, neither black nor white (*MOT*, 65). In

fact, he enjoys a reputation that exceeds well beyond the color line, is “very much liked by the white physicians” (64) and considered a “very good sort of [...] negro, [...] not meddl[ing] with politics, [...] spending money in the community [...] and contributing to its prosperity” (252). As a successful professional and socially evolving man of color, Miller is living proof of the continuous progress of African Americans in the South, and thus represents precisely the generation of self-assertive “new negroes” (87) that white supremacists like the Big Three feel threatened by. The most noticeable physical sign of Miller’s progressive influence is his hospital, which he builds “without the support of white philanthropy [...] safe from the firm hand of white control” (Danielson 81), and staffs with a new generation of trained, independent young blacks. Though he “had been strongly tempted to leave the South [...] for [...] a career [...] in the freer North”, Miller returns to Wellington not for professional gain, but because the black community “need[s] him, and he [...] wish[es] to help them, and [...] contribute to their uplifting” (*MOT*, 51). Despite all contrary racial traditions and attempts to keep the black community down, I read Miller as the prime example for his race to press forward and show “the ability to live and thrive under adverse circumstances” (61).

I would propose that Miller’s view of manhood highly values hard work as a means to gain social status and financial worth and to prove to his community “that he possesse[s] character and power” so that it “would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good” (*MOT*, 65). Throughout the novel, Miller repeatedly illustrates that he believes in a non-violent and non-aggressive approach to reconcile the races and “preaches passive reaction to white oppression” (Delmar 270). He believes that the racial tensions in the South are a “mere temporary thing” which will “disappear in time” (*MOT*, 65) and, though he cannot deny his “manly instinct” to join the fight during the riot, he decides to be “not heroic, but [...] wise” (282f.) and refuses the leadership of the black rebels. Miller considers violence as an unnecessary and “hopeless struggle” (285) against the white lynch mob and trusts that the black community’s time “to command respect for [their] rights” will come (283). However, his decision to stand back suggests that he “relies on the white community to grant [them] their rights rather than asserting the capacity of African Americans to claim their own” (Danielson 82). In this respect, I would argue that Miller exhibits a similar inability to act as shown in the analysis of Lee Ellis. While Ellis’s paralysis arises from his toxic race loyalty and an insurmountable rift between

his public and private identities, Miller is unable to act because he is, as a black man, “monitored by white males” (Mohr 427). In order to “keep the status he has, [he] tries not to agitate white [men]” but “accepts their unfair treatment” (427f.) and advocates for restraint and moderation among the black population. His “distinct feeling of shame” (*MOT*, 201) upon refusing the leadership of the black rebels and his move to leave the decision of whether he should save Dodie Carteret’s life to his wife at the end of the novel illustrate both Miller’s lack of moral courage to challenge white oppression as well as his non-confrontational approach to forgiveness and reconciliation. That his hospital becomes the center of attention during the violent riot and is eventually destroyed suggests the defenselessness and vulnerability of Southern black manhood during the post-Reconstruction era. However, as Chesnutt himself argues in *Stories, Novels, and Essays*, his novel “is not a study in pessimism,” and he believes “that the forces of progress will in the end prevail, and that in time a remedy may be found for every social ill” (Chesnutt 873 qtd. in Zogas 147). Accordingly, Susan Danielson interprets the defense of the hospital by Josh Miller and his gang of black rebels, albeit futile, as “the black community’s suppor[t] [of] modern science and the professionalism for which it stands” (81).

3.2.3 Southern black manhood

The previous sections have focused on Anglo Saxon and African American upper middle-class male characters and their notions of manhood as presented in the novel. As the analysis has shown, these characters’ social and economic power grants them a certain freedom and fosters their perceived superiority over lower-class black individuals. Therefore, the following section will now focus on some of the novel’s working-class African American men and will reveal how their constant exposure to racial and class discrimination influences their notions of manhood.

Of all the characters in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Josh Green is presented as the most rebellious and prototypically manly. Physically, he is depicted as a “black giant” (*MOT*, 109; 309), a “huge negro” (58) and a “great black figure” (62), which renders him “an invincible physical emblem of masculinity” (Richardson 29) and secures him the “involuntary admiration” (*MOT*, 309) even of white characters. As the only black character who openly speaks up against white oppression, Green pursues a much more active strategy to counter racial inequality than the moderate Dr. Miller.

While Miller fears to compromise his good social standing in Wellington by behaving like a “bad negr[o]” (110), Green “ha[s] a reputation for absolute fearlessness” (109) and is not afraid to speak up for his rights, which later earns him the title of “spokesman” during the riot (282). He is not only presented as physically strong, but also as a determined, independent and proud individual who “wan’ nothin’ but w’at [he] wo’k fer, but [he] wants all er dat” (114). Despite his intimidating appearance and “somewhat reckless” demeanor, Green is also described as “good natured” and “pleasure-loving” (59), and displays a certain gentleness in caring for his mother, who “ha[s] lost the light of reason” on the night her husband was murdered by Captain McBane and the Ku Klux Klan (112). Green, who witnessed the assault as a young child, desires to avenge his father and kill McBane, a goal for which he is willing to die. During the riot, he gathers a small number of combat-ready African Americans “to protect the black community [and] to defend their manhood” against the violent white mob (Richardson 29). During the riot’s climax, the blazing black hospital suggests that Green’s rebellion was futile. However, in a “heroic and masculinist” (29) act, Green kills and gets killed by McBane, thus succeeding in fulfilling his life’s goal and ending the riot. The black rebels’ overall failure to defend their African American community against white violence suggests that effective black resistance cannot be achieved by one group alone. During the riot, the streets are “curiously empty of colored people” (*MOT*, 184), and while Dr. Miller, a recognized influencer of the black community in Wellington and representative of an aspiring African American middle-class, perceives himself superior to “low-down” workers like Green, and decides to “be peaceable and [rather] endure a little injustice [...] than run the risk of a sudden and violent death” (110), Green would “ruther be a dead nigger any day dan a live dog” (284) and takes a stand against white oppression for the benefit of the entire black community. Since Green dies while Miller lives, Robert Nowatzki argues that the former’s bravery is “not as effective” (66) as the latter’s passive endurance. However, I would point out that the doctor’s moderate demeanor and privileged position do not spare him from the consequences of the racial tensions in the post-Reconstruction South, which becomes most apparent when his only son is killed during the riot. The juxtaposition of the working-class Green and the middle-class Miller also draws attention to the gap in racial consciousness between the two classes. Although the novel suggests that they are roughly the same age, Miller can “recollect very little” about the Ku Klux Klan while Green “wuz right in it, an’ so [he]

'members mo' erbout it" (*MOT*, 111). I would propose that Miller's privileged social and economic status allows him to gladly "forget" this "page of history", while characters like Green are less fortunate. Jae Roe argues that Miller is "detach[ed] from the material conditions of Southern blacks", and although both characters are creations of the white supremacist South, "Miller clearly turns out to be the more damaged product" (237).

Besides Green's militant resistance and Miller's passive endurance, I would like to introduce a third category of black male characters represented by Jerry Letlow and Sandy Campbell. Jerry is the grandson of the Carterets' nurse Mammy Jane and works as a porter in the *Morning Chronicle* office, and Sandy is the faithful servant of Old Mr. Delamere. While there are certainly vast differences between them, I would like to focus on the fact that both are representatives of the servile "old-time negroes", who are favored and accepted by white people "because they had once belonged to them, - much the same reason why they fondled their cats and dogs" (*MOT*, 42). Both Jerry and Sandy contradict the advancement of their African American community through their submissive servitude and their reliance upon the protection of their white employers. Their allegiance lies with the whites, and they trust that their servitude and loyalty will guarantee their protection in case they need it. Although Jerry understands that the Big Three are working on some kind of revolution, he is "gwine ter keep [his] mouf shet an' stan' in wid the Angry-Saxon race [...] an' keep on de right side er [his] bread an' meat" (90). When he helps to identify Sandy as the alleged murderer of Mrs. Ochiltree, Jerry is proud to have proven his loyalty to the white people, and his trust in their protection is stronger than ever. However, his "reliance upon his white friends [...] fail[s] him in the moment of supreme need" during the riot, when Major Carteret "[does] not even hear his servant's voice" (307), and Jerry is killed by the white mob. Sandy's fate, on the other hand, proves more fortunate. Although he "regard[s] himself as belonging to the quality, and seldom stooped to notice those beneath him" (131) and is proud to serve Old Mr. Delamere because "all de ole Delameres wuz gent'emen, an' deir principles spread ter de niggers 'round 'em" (208), his perceived privileged status does not save him from being wrongly accused of murder and being almost lynched by the angry white mob. However, in contrast to Jerry, Sandy is not failed by his "patron and protector" (300), since Old Mr. Delamere rushes to his aid and helps clear his name.

As the lynch plot develops, the novel reveals the white population's illogical justifications for black violence:

Suspicion [is] at once directed toward the negroes, as it always is when an unexplained crime is committed in a Southern community. [...] Having been, for generations, trained up to thriftlessness, theft, and immorality, against which only thirty years of very limited opportunity can be offset, during which brief period *they have been denied in large measure the healthful social stimulus and sympathy* which holds most men in the path of rectitude, colored people might reasonably be expected to commit at least a share of crime proportionate to their numbers. (*MOT*, 178f., emphasis added)

While the racial rants of the Big Three repeatedly suggest that the black community's behavior is the result of the race's innate inferiority, the above quote redirects the blame back to the white community, suggesting that their treatment of African Americans is directly linked to how they behave. Having been abused and mistreated in every possible way even after the Reconstruction period leaves the black community with "very limited opportunity" (*MOT*, 178). While most of them choose flight – either into hiding, or into the arms of their white protectors – the more privileged black characters, like Dr. Miller, exert patient endurance, trusting that change will come without their active involvement. Only a handful of characters, among them Josh Green, chooses to stand up and fight for their rights, albeit, as the novel shows, in vain. As Charles Hackenberry observes,

[t]he black man in *The Marrow of Tradition* is trapped. If he keeps the old ways, accepts his station in life he is not protected by the white master he serves [...] because the protection they rel[y] upon is withdrawn in time of crises. The strong-willed, assertive Blacks [...] are killed outright for their very opposition. Those who emulate Dr. Miller perhaps escape with their lives, but they suffer too; their children are slaughtered or they are driven away, without property or hope. (Hackenberry 197, emphasis in original)

Through its many characters and different representations of Southern black manhood, the novel illustrates the influence of the oppressive nature of the South on its inhabitants, and seems to suggest that before any reconciliation between the white and black race can be achieved, the prevailing interracial differences must be overcome.

3.3 The men that gathered in *A Gathering of Old Men*

The final novel under analysis in this paper is Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*, which takes us from Chesnutt's urban North Carolina at the turn of the nineteenth century to the rural Louisiana of the 1970s. While *The Marrow of Tradition* introduced the first (Miller's father), second (Miller himself) and third (Miller's son) generations of African Americans born free from slavery, the main protagonists of *A Gathering of Old Men* represent at least the third, if not the fourth generation. However, although the story is set more than one hundred years after the American Civil War and over a decade after the introduction of civil rights legislation, the novel draws a surprisingly unchanged picture of the social and economic subjugation of African Americans in the South. Favored by the color of their skin, the Cajuns – whites of French descent (Abrams 74) – rent most of the profitable land from the white plantation owners, thus putting the black community at a serious economic disadvantage on top of treating them with the same old racial bias and contempt since slavery. Moreover, the rise of mechanization in the form of the tractor further reduces the need for black labor and widens the deep-rooted gap between the Cajun and black communities, while the privileged whites continue to exercise control over both. Consequently, in Gaines's fictional St. Raphael Parish, time seems to have stopped and its inhabitants – whites, blacks and Cajuns alike – are largely depicted as unwilling to accept the progress of time and continue to live in, and are burdened by, their pasts. In this society, a group of elderly black men decide to powerfully reclaim their manhood, thereby forcing the white and Cajun communities to finally acknowledge their ordeal and accept them as equal members of society.

In the following sections, I will discuss the presented notions of manhood as closely linked to the men's heritages. First, black masculinity will be analyzed in the context of dialogue and community. The second section will then focus on the Cajuns' simultaneous representation as violent symbols of black suppression and proud family men who themselves suffer from discrimination. Finally, the last part will look at white men's perspective and reveal the different approaches to white masculinity as offered by the novel.

3.3.1 (Re-)Claiming black masculinity

The unfolding events in the novel suggest that, once again, the main interest of Gaines's male characters in *A Gathering of Old Men* lies in exploring manifold concepts of manhood, regaining – or sometimes gaining for the very first time – male dignity, and making a stand for themselves and their whole people. At the beginning of the novel, Mathu is the only black person known to “ha[ve] ever stood up” (GOM, 31) to white oppression and has not “succumbed to the dehumanization imposed by his society” (Babb 121). His courage and strength earn him respect not only among the black community, but also among the white. Candy Marshall, whom Mathu helped raise, loves him, and even Sheriff Mapes “admire[s]” (GOM, 74) and respects him for being “a man” (83). For Mathu, manhood means to stand up for himself and his family, and to resume responsibility for his actions. I would argue that he lives with a dignity and self-awareness similar to that of Josh Green from *The Marrow of Tradition*, because he, too, demands to be respected and treated fairly. Like Josh, Mathu is not afraid to use physical violence if it is necessary to secure his just place in society, as the fight between him and Fix illustrates. Long before the day of the gathering, Mathu refuses to be degraded by Fix, warning the sheriff that “if Fix start[s] anything, he [is] go’n protect himself,” leading to the “[w]orst,” but not “the last fight Mathu had on that river with them white people” (GOM, 30). Even years later, he is depicted as “a old post in the ground – narrow but still strong, and not leaning, and not trembling either” (84).

As the only black man who has “a clear sense of manhood and refus[es] to submit to white men” (Carmean 99), Mathu is depicted by the other old men at Marshall as a kind of role model, someone they can look up to and admire. Despite his reputation among the black community, however, the novel suggests that he is not very well integrated and occupies a kind of outsider status. As “one of them blue-black Singaleese niggers,” Mathu prides himself on having “no white man’s blood in his veins” (GOM, 51) and considers himself superior to anyone with lighter skin. Consequently, Valerie Babb argues that “Mathu symbolizes the danger assertiveness and dignity pose to the maintenance of black subjugation” (121). The novel reveals that Mathu does not respect any of the other black men because of their cowardly behavior and past inactions. As he confesses near the end of the novel, he is filled with a bitterness, “[h]ating them out there on that river, hating [the old men] in the

quarters" (*GOM*, 182). Mathu is angry because white people have always denied him equal rights and is constantly disappointed by the other black men's impassivity. The only person he shows affection towards is Candy, yet at the same time he realizes that he will never be able to live free as long as she wants to protect him, which is ironic since he has proven all his life that he does not need anyone's protection and is capable of taking care of himself.

Until the day of the gathering, Mathu's excessive pride in being "black black" (*GOM*, 6) and his bitterness against the world cast him as an outsider. His loneliness is reflected in the description of his house, from which "[y]ou could see [that] Mathu stayed [t]here by himself" (178), as well as from the way he interacts with the old men during the gathering, where he is "the only person who [does] not [get] into the line" (71) for being slapped by the sheriff. While he "has always been brave enough to challenge whites, he has never really understood other blacks", and initially "sees no reason to take a [...] role in the drama on [his] porch" (Doyle, *Voices* 192). Significantly, however, he does also not prevent it, for example by contradicting the old men's claims to have killed Beau themselves. Thus, I would propose that while he does not support the other men at first, he still grants them the freedom to finally face their lifelong fears and reclaim their manhood and place in society. Only when he finally acknowledges the other men's courage does he feel "changed by [them]" (*GOM*, 181). By declaring that "[he] look[s] up to [...] [e]very man in here. And this the proudest day of [his] life" (180), Mathu recognizes the men's strength and finally accepts them as his equals. He feels proud to be reunited with his own people and "comes to see that personal dignity has more to do with acts of conscience and courage than with racial purity" (Carmean 104). His reintegration into the black community also enables him to "physically separat[e]" himself from Candy (Carmean 104). By telling her that "[i]t's time" for her to go with Lou, he finally "pull[s] her free" (*GOM*, 176) so that he can be with "the rest of [his] people" (213) and she can start a new life of her own.

While Mathu's transformation from "hardhearted old man" (*GOM*, 182) to reintegrated part of the black community is initiated by the old men's gathering in his yard after the murder of Beau Boutan, "[i]t is ultimately [Mathu's] example that inspires the others to a new daring" (Babb 121). Like everyone else, the old men assume that Mathu killed Beau since he is "[t]he only one with nuts enough to do it" (*GOM*, 72). The old men have always admired Mathu's courage to stand up for

himself throughout his life, and now feel a certain responsibility “to stand with [him]. To die with him, ‘side him, if [they] have to. That’s why [they] all come here – out of respect for him” (177). Nevertheless, the novel emphasizes the fact that the burden of the old men’s past weighs heavily upon them, and depicts their painful struggle to find out “[w]hat [...] it mean[s] to be a man in a society that tries to keep African-American men from being men” (Abrams 86). I read their struggle to eventually become men and reclaim dignity and respect at a very late stage in their lives as closely linked to their ability to process their pasts at last.

Throughout the novel, the group of old men give an oral account of their past lives, which were full of injustices, inequalities, harassment, humiliations and never penalized wrongdoings against them and their families. On their way to Mathu’s house, the old men visit their ancestors’ graveyard, where many of them relive instances of and reconnect with their burdensome pasts. As Karen Carmean notes, “the graveyard [...] suggests more than a former physical connection to and displacement of the land. It evokes the conflicting emotions [they] associate with Marshall,” and helps them to “recall a history of injury inflicted and condoned by the white community” (103f.). Visiting the graveyard brings the men closer to their ancestors, closer to the challenges they had to face in their lives, and closer to the injustices they and their loved ones had to endure. The graveyard offers the first glimpse of “why [they are] here today, to make up for what [they] had done [to their families] over thirty years ago [...], to do something for all the others” (*GOM*, 45f.). It serves as a reminder of why it is necessary for them to finally stand up, and gives them the last incentive needed to take things into their own hands and finally, “to act” (Carmean 103).

Their action, as William Mallon observes, takes place in an unconventional form, namely through dialogue. It is through dialogue rather than violence that Gaines’s black male characters discover a sense of masculinity and “establish a new paradigm” of black manhood (1). By engaging with their past as collective memory, the men ask forgiveness for their failures and seek absolution from each other, thereby creating a community which provides them with strength and courage. They discover “the empowering nature of communal storytelling and storylistening in terms of black male agency and subject formation” (Clark 196). Furthermore, the old men use dialogue to powerfully reject the southern racial codes which govern black

masculinity in three contexts: at home with their wives, at the plantation amongst each other, and in conversation with the white community (Mallon 1).

When Matthew Lincoln Brown aka Mat is confronted by his wife while preparing for the gathering, he initially relies upon the same degrading and subjugating techniques that white people use when talking to him. For instance, “he refuses to engage her in conversation” (Mallon 12), then categorically excludes her because of her gender by declaring “This men business” (*GOM*, 35), much in the same way that white people exclude him because of his race. He objectifies her by addressing her merely as “woman” instead of using her name, and refuses to share his knowledge with her (Mallon 12f.). Notably, however, at the point in their confrontation where a white person might start using silence as a means to refuse to “speak on equal terms” with a black person, Mat’s long accumulated feelings “of frustration, rage, anger and humiliation” culminate in a sudden outburst (13):

‘Woman, what’s the matter with me? All these years we been living together, woman, you still don’t know what’s the matter with me? The years we done struggled in George Medlow’s field, making him richer and richer and us getting poorer and poorer – and you still don’t know what’s the matter with me? [...] Oliver, woman!’ [he] screamed at her. ‘Oliver. How they let him die in the hospital just ‘cause he was black. No doctor to serve him, let him bleed to death, ‘cause he was black [...]’. [He] could feel the hot tears running down [his] face. [He] pressed [his] lips, [he] could feel [his] mouth trembling, but the tears kept on running down [his] face. It had been a long time since [he] had talked to her like this. A longer time since she had seen [him] crying. [He] didn’t turn [his] head. [He] didn’t wipe [his] face. [He] just stood there looking at her. (*GOM*, 37)

By using his voice to expose his anger and sorrow instead of silence or violence, Mat breaks with expected masculine and racial behavior and “demonstrates that voice and story function [...] as viable vehicles for the transformation of the black self”, thereby “deconstruct[ing] the notion that black masculinity is merely derivative” and that white masculinity is “the benchmark” (Clark 196f.). Until the day of the gathering, Mat and the other old men have been denied exerting their masculinity in white society, which, as Mat admits, has often led him to exert and abuse power over the only person that he feels he can control, namely his wife. This time, however, he finally confronts her by using dialogue and is no more afraid to talk about issues of “failure, fear and pain”. Mat thereby demonstrates how he and the other black men can embrace their masculinity in a non-traditional masculine way (Mallon 13), which,

however painful it may be, leaves him “[feeling] kinda good, knowing [...] [he] [is] doing something different, for the first time” (*GOM*, 39).

The gathering at Mathu’s house presents the second context in which the old men use dialogue to deconstruct existing racial codes. In Joseph Seaberry aka Rufe’s chapter, the men take turns to relate their stories to each other, thereby creating a distinct and “powerful linguistic community” (Mallon 14), “speak[ing] the truth, without fear” (*GOM*, 93). For the first time, they use their voices to speak up for each other, something that none of them – except for Mathu – have ever been brave enough to do. By forming their own community, they set themselves apart from the other people present at Mathu’s house, most notably the white witnesses Sheriff Mapes, Candy Marshall and Lou Dimes. One by one, the old men recall, relate and relive the horrors of their pasts and “work out their gall” (*GOM*, 95), thereby empowering each other. By acknowledging their guilt over their past silences and inactions to one another, they seek absolution from the burdens of their past in order to make them free to act in the present (Mallon 15). When Tucker finishes talking about his brother Silas, who was beaten to death by the Cajuns while Tucker just stood there watching impassively, he

look[s] at all of [the other men]. But none of [them] look[s] back at him. [They] had all done the same thing sometime or another; [they] had all seen [their] brother, sister, mama, daddy insulted once and didn’t do a thing about it. [...] All of [them] had stood here – in one of these old yards – and [they] had all hollered toward that graveyard. ‘Forgive me!’ [...] [Tucker] want[s] [them] to pass judgement over him for what he had done. [Them] judge him? How could any of [them] judge him? Who hadn’t done the same thing, sometime or another? (*GOM*, 96f.)

Relating their stories to each other has a therapeutic effect on the old men. Sharing a common past of suffering, degradation and denial of their manhood by the white community, and having been too afraid to stand up for themselves before, the men now seize the opportunity of this group reconciliation to gain new confidence in and power from their voices (Mallon 17).

Finally, once the men have reclaimed their courage and strength from their linguistic community, they feel empowered to confront also the white community on an equal footing. This allows them to eventually dismiss the racial codes that have so long dictated how they could speak to a white person and enables them to reclaim their masculinity by speaking – and by extension living – on their own terms (Mallon 17). Rather than to remain silent and only speak when spoken to, they take control of

the conversation with Mapes by interrupting and defying the sheriff, cutting him off, rejecting his authority and reversing the racial codes when referring to his deputy as “[t]hat boy” (*GOM*, 95), thereby marking him as inferior. When Mapes asks Mathu to tell the men “to go home”, Mathu acknowledges the old men’s independence by letting Mapes know that “[t]hat’s up to them” and that he “can’t make nobody say what they don’t want to say” since “[a] man got to do what he think is right [...] That’s what part him from a boy” (84). Later, when the old men decide to congregate alone in Mathu’s house, Clatoo boldly announces to Candy that “[they] don’t want [her] there this time” and that “[he] ain’t taking no orders [from her] either” (173). At this point, even Sheriff Mapes has come to realize that if the men “want to talk, they’ll talk” (173), and acknowledges that the old men have reclaimed control over their lives at last. While he has always respected Mathu because he considers him “a real man”, he “[doesn’t] think much of the rest of [the old men], and he [doesn’t] respect [them]” (84). By listening to their stories and witnessing their transformation, however, Mapes realizes that they have finally found their voices. His attitude towards the men slowly starts to change and is, I would suggest, sealed with the return and confession of Charlie Biggs.

Although Charlie is absent throughout most of the novel, I consider him as the prime symbol of the men’s quest to reclaim their manhood, since he represents the physical proof of their final transformation from “frightened little bedbugs” (*GOM*, 15) to men. Charlie is initially introduced as a fifty-year-old “manchild” (Shannon 207) and referred to as “Big Charlie, nigger boy” (187) who is known for letting himself being pushed around by everybody. Too afraid to stand up for himself, Charlie always hides behind his *parrain* Mathu and runs away from confrontations. On the day he shoots Beau, however, he realizes that “[t]hey comes a day when a man must be a man [...] when a man got to stand” (189ff.) and refuses to be abused by Beau any longer. Pushed by Mathu, who would “rather see [him] laying there dead than to run from another man” (191), Charlie shoots Beau in self-defense. As Valerie Babb observes, “[t]he murder becomes his first act of social impact and serves as a turning point in his life as he rediscovers the pride he thought lost [...] [and] demands the respect he feels is his due” (123). After the murder, however, Charlie is too afraid to take responsibility and falls back into his old habits, wanting Mathu to take the blame and disappearing into the swamps. While Charlie is absent, his action serves as “a wake-up call [...] and the signal for the old men that the time has come to [...]

recover their dignity through an act of courage” (Lambert 117). Meanwhile, Charlie needs to “accep[t] responsibility for [his] action” in order to become a man (White 174), and to his own surprise, “something stop[s] [him]” from running farther, until he eventually hears a voice “calling [him] back” to Mathu’s (*GOM*, 192f.). When he confesses to Mapes, he “proves himself a man” (Babb 122). Though he suspects that Mathu has always “tried to make [him] a man” (*GOM*, 189), his method of “beating [Charlie] for running” (188) is unsuccessful because black masculinity cannot be achieved through violence, but through dialogue. Daniel White argues that “beating [...] destroy[s] communication [...] [which] cannot be established through force [...] [but] has to be based on [...] [c]ompassion and mutual respect” (173). Having finally gained the respect of Mathu and the other old men, Charlie now knows that “[he’s] a man” and “want[s] the world to know [he’s] a man” (*GOM*, 187). By demanding to be addressed henceforth as “Mister Biggs” (187), Charlie “attempts to re-situate [himself] as subjec[t]” and “attain[s] some degree of agency, self-definition, and authority amidst an abnegating southern environment” (Clark 195). That the white sheriff accepts his demand “with sincerity” ultimately manifests Charlie’s transformation from “nigger boy” to “man” (*GOM*, 193).

As this examination demonstrated, *A Gathering of Old Men* succeeds to break with the still predominant racial codes that govern black manhood in the South not only because black men engage in dialogue of equality with each other, but because the white community, who has denied them equality for so long, is finally willing to honestly engage in this dialogue, too. Charlie and the old men have been “psychologically castrated” all their lives (Clark 198). By finally standing up for themselves, coming to terms with their pasts and facing their fears through communal dialogue, they eventually achieve independence and are empowered to take control of their lives again.

3.3.2 Violence and family honor in the Cajun community

In contrast to the new mode of masculinity introduced by the old black men, which is based on communal dialogue rather than violence, the notions of manhood displayed by the Cajuns Beau and Fix Boutan represent the exact opposite. Even more so than Charlie Biggs, both Boutans are physically absent from most of the story. Nevertheless, I would argue that their presence dominates the novel. The Boutans

are known to be violent and unforgiving racists, and “[t]here’s not a black family in this parish Fix and his crowd hasn’t hurt sometime or other” (*GOM*, 18). For as long as anyone on Marshall can remember, the Boutans have taken law into their own hands and have been infamous for maltreating, subjugating and tyrannizing the black community for decades. Consequently, everyone gathered at Mathu’s house, blacks and whites alike, is “expect[ing] to hear Fix and his drove coming in them trucks with them guns any minute” (11) to “demand a nigger’s blood” (62) for the murder of his son. The looming violence of their retribution is so threatening that the other characters do not even need to “us[e] Fix’s name” to remind themselves of the impending danger (85). The mere prompt “Pray, Janey,” is enough for Miss Merle to let Janey “kno[w] she [is] talking about Fix” (13), and Sheriff Mapes “eyes [are] saying Fix, not his mouth” when he asks Mathu whether he wants “any of these people hurt” (85).

As Karen Carmean observes, “[f]or the elderly men, Fix and Beau represent racial oppression in the many forms all have experienced” (104) and embody all white supremacists who have ever enslaved African Americans after the Civil War by employing the same old techniques of violence, humiliation and abuse. “[T]he old days” in which Fix “and his boys used to ride” (*GOM*, 115), however, are long gone, a fact that is best exemplified by Beau’s death. As the novel reveals, Beau “is willing to kill Charlie rather than accept him as an equal” (Babb 119), and he finally becomes a victim of his own antiquated and violent rules when his employee, Charlie, refuses to be abused any longer and strikes back in self-defense. Beau’s death, then, sets in motion the action of the novel. It is the fear of Beau’s father that is one of the factors that motivate the old men to gather at Mathu’s house and stand by Mathu’s side in the face of the Cajuns’ retribution. Furthermore, I would suggest that Beau represents the primary symbol of the agricultural changes that have forced the African Americans off their ancestral land. When Candy Marshall’s family “dosed out the land for sharecropping, [they gave] the best land to the Cajuns” and left the black community with “the bottomland near the swamps” (*GOM*, 94). The tractors that the Cajun farmers have brought further reduced the need for black labor, which made it necessary for “[t]he young ones [to go] away, leaving only the old and a few children” at Marshall (58). As the graveyard scene and stories of their past reveal, the local black culture has since been slowly displaced and the old men are threatened by how “that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard”, because “one day [it

is] go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that [they] ever was" (92). Though already highly unpopular among the black community during his lifetime, in death Beau comes to represent the ultimate bogeyman for the old black men. His dead body lying in front of his tractor causes their feelings of displacement to resurge, and leads them to take responsibility for shooting him, thereby finally reclaiming their manhood and dignity.

The old men's fear of getting erased even outweighs their fear of Fix's violent revenge, which, in the end, proves needless anyway. The once merciless despot of the Cajun family clan is by the time of the novel merely an old man himself, and while thirty years ago, "[n]othing could keep Fix from Marshall" (*GOM*, 169), he now has "no other cause to fight for" than his family (147). It is precisely his family, however, who now urge him to caution. While Fix is still ready to "seek justice" because "[a] member of the family has been insulted" (147) and "feels justified in taking the law into his own hands [...], for all black men are guilty of Beau's murder, by virtue of their color" (Babb 127), his wish to keep the family together outweighs his need for vengeance. Though he might not agree with his sons, Fix abides by their wish to remain passive and let the law take care of the situation at Marshall. For Fix, it is more important that "[t]here will be no split in this family" (*GOM*, 145) than to retaliate. Nevertheless, Fix remains the proud patriarch he has always been, and seems to take his sons' decision personal. Being proud of his family name and not ashamed of his violent past, he suggests that Gil and Jean "change [their] name if that will help [them]" and dismisses them from his house claiming that he "[doesn't] wish to see either one of [them] ever again" (147). Fix is too blinded by his pride to realize that the racist worldview he and parts of his family still hold does no longer fit into the new South, which is ironically best embodied by the character of his youngest son, Gil.

In contrast to Beau and Fix, Gil Boutan represents the possibility of interracial harmony in the novel (cf. White 178). As "[t]he educated one" and "only one in the family to ever go to LSU" (*GOM*, 145), Gil represents the most hopeful quasi-white character in the novel. Like the old black men, Gil is able to find other ways of exerting his masculinity than violence, since "in order to reconstruct the South, both black and white men must reject the traditional Western model of manhood that links masculinity and violence" (S. Jones 31). His Cajun heritage and especially his family's history, however, have not failed to leave their mark on him. Just like the old black men, Gil suffers from the violent past of his family. "All [his] life [he] heard what

[his] family have done to others,” and “[i]t hurts [him]” (*GOM*, 137). His family’s history does not represent his own progressive beliefs, since he is “do[ing] all [he] can to stop [racial hatred]. Every day of [his] life, [he] do[es] all [he] can to stop it” (122). At the same time, he is also conscious of how the Cajuns have been treated by privileged whites like Candy Marshall and her family. Historically, the relationship between whites, Cajuns and blacks has always been difficult, since whites considered themselves superior to both. While they granted the Cajuns more privileges simply based on the color of their skin, they never acknowledged them as equals but “considered [them] a by-product of whiteness and trapped [them] in the same logic of racial discrimination” (Lambert 117). As Terrence Tucker observes, “[t]he [...] unequal division of the land reiterates the tradition of white privilege, but it maintains an economic hierarchy that keeps both groups [Cajuns and blacks] dependent on the [white] Marshalls” (T. Tucker 117). In this respect, I would argue that the Cajuns depicted in *A Gathering of Old Men* share a similar history to that of the “white trash” slave patrollers in *The Known World*. Both groups have been preferred by whites in some respects while they could never achieve real equality and have always been considered inferior to whites. As demonstrated in both novels, slave patrollers and Cajuns alike take out their frustration on African Americans by exerting what little power they are granted over the underprivileged blacks. The issue of hierarchy based on heritage is also addressed by Gil in the novel when he confronts Candy, accusing her of having “never liked any of [them]. Looking at [them] as if [they]’re a breed below [her]. But [they]’re not [...]. [They]’re all made of the same bone, the same blood, *the same skin*. [Her] folks had a break, [his] didn’t, that’s all” (*GOM*, 122, emphasis added). In this accusation, Gil equates Cajuns and African Americans in the sense that both groups have been unjustly subjugated by privileged whites. At the same time, however, by specifically mentioning the issue of “same skin”, Gil employs the old argument for racial segregation and subjugation based on skin color, favoring white skin over black. His observation demonstrates that just as there are intraracial conflicts within the black community – Mathu considering himself superior to lighter skinned blacks, blacks of French origin perceived as “quality” (45) as opposed to others – there are disputes based on heritage among the white community as well.

The confrontation with Candy, however, is not the only one that Gil seeks on the day of his brother’s murder. After visiting Marshall Plantation, he arrives at his

family home willing to stand up against his family's violence and emerges as the defender of racial tolerance. Gil seems fully aware of the ongoing racial tensions and recognizes the importance for long overdue racial reconciliation. As an aspiring fullback in the Southeastern Conference, he experiences the advantages of racial interdependence every time he plays with his black teammate Cal. Together, they are "Salt and Pepper", and represent, for "[t]he first time ever, black and white, in the Deep South" (*GOM*, 137). Although the murder of his brother leaves him hurt and angry, his youth and education make Gil realize that blind and violent retribution will do more harm than good. He knows that "Beau is dead" and that "[n]othing [he and his family] can do will bring him back" (138). Although "tell[ing] his father what he fe[els] inside of him [is] the hardest thing for him to do" (137), he resumes responsibility and stands up for his future-oriented belief, successfully urging his father to prove that the Boutans "[are] not what [the people] think [they] are" (143). I would propose that being raised as the son of Fix Boutan has provided Gil with the self-confidence and strength now needed to confront his father and to stand up for his own beliefs, which have been shaped by his youth and higher education. Daniel White notes that while the black community, "separated because of slavery, [is] striving to come together", Gil, on the other hand, "initiates progress by separating himself from his father", thereby "reject[ing] the stagnant racial codes of the past and forg[ing] a new tradition of racial cooperation and harmony" (White 178). Gil realizes that "[s]ometimes [he] got to hurt something to help something" (*GOM*, 150) and achieves "maturity when he rejects his society's equation of masculinity with violence" (S. Jones 30). His courage prevents yet another violent confrontation between Cajuns and African Americans, and his brave and progressive attitude earns him the respect of many black and white characters all over the United States. Therefore, I read Gil as a strong symbol of the future-oriented hope of racial reconciliation in the South, and the final scene in the courtroom suggests that also the Boutan family itself is capable of reconciliation, since Gil sits with Fix and his family to await the judge's verdict (*GOM*, 211).

3.3.3 The white perspective

The previous sections have focused on the African Americans' reclaimed dialogue-based and violence-free notions of manhood as well as on the Cajuns' conflicted,

outdated and eventually hopeful representations of masculinity. As already mentioned, though to varying extents, both groups have historically suffered from subjugation and the denial of their rights by privileged whites. Therefore, the final section will now analyze how white masculinity is presented in *A Gathering of Old Men* by focusing on the characters of Lou Dimes, Sheriff Mapes and Luke Will.

While Gil Boutan embodies the most hopeful quasi-white character in terms of racial equality, I would propose that Louis Alfred Dimoulin aka Lou Dimes represents a new mode of white Southern masculinity resembling the changing times in the South. Lou is in his mid-thirties, works for a newspaper in Baton Rouge and has been Candy Marshall's boyfriend for three years. As a white man from the city, Lou takes on a kind of outsider perspective in the novel. He joins the gathering at Mathu's house upon Candy's request, but with his "baby-blue Porsche" (*GOM*, 117) the novel highlights that he does not belong on the plantation. Though he is "worried" (58) about Candy, Lou is not personally involved in or affected by the gathering, which makes his observations the most objective ones in the novel. Due to his profession as a reporter and his role as an outsider or bystander, Lou's narration is often factual and not based on emotions, and as the narrator of four chapters, Lou is the character with the most narrated sections. I would argue that Lou's character is somewhat similar to that of Lee Ellis from *The Marrow of Tradition*. Both are journalists, both occupy an outsider status and represent a kind of neutral ground between the other characters. In Lou's case, he often functions as an intermediary between Sheriff Mapes and Candy, and his neutral position is further highlighted when he is put in charge by Mapes during the fight at the end of the novel and tries to arbitrate between the old black men and their white attackers.

As an educated white man from the city with liberal views, Lou represents a new generation of urban Southern masculinity distinctly different from the traditional views of manhood illustrated by Sheriff Mapes. Lou's girlfriend Candy's involvement in and behavior during the gathering leads the sheriff and Miss Merle to wonder "[w]hat kind of husband [Lou will] make" (*GOM*, 127) because, in their minds, he should exert better control over her. Though Lou "[doesn't] like what [is] going on either" (67), he tries to change Candy's mind by talking to her instead of using force, but soon realizes that she is not ready to let go of her idea of justice and grudgingly lets her "make a spectacle of [herself]" (175). His behavior during the gathering seems to resemble his relationship with Candy in general. While Lou appears to be

ready to marry her, he accepts the fact that Candy is still too deeply invested in her relationship with Mathu and the plantation to start a new life of her own. Representing a concept of manhood distinctly different from the old white Southern masculinity that relies on the domination of women, land and blacks, Lou patiently waits until Candy is ready to move on. During the gathering, Lou “can perceive Mathu’s independence and identity even when Candy cannot” (Babb 126) and realizes that their relationship has changed irrevocably. He tells her that by “pull[ing] [her] hands off his arm and [going] into that room, [Mathu] was setting both of [them] free” (*GOM*, 184) and hopes that Candy is now finally ready to make decisions for her own life. He demands “a yes or no to where [their] relationship is going”, and again refrains from using violence even when Candy responds by hitting him. “[I]nstead of hitting her back, [he] rub[s] the side of his face” and tells her that “[he] won’t be coming back anymore” (184). Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, Candy and Lou are standing together in front of the courthouse, watching the old men and Mathu leave, and Candy “search[es] for [Lou’s] hand; then [...] squeez[es] [his] fingers” (213). Thus, although Lou is initially introduced as an outsider, the gathering eventually leads to “a big change in [his] life” (184), too, and in a way rewards him for his progressive form of masculinity, which is based on sensitivity and understanding rather than domination and force.

In contrast to Lou’s liberal views of manhood, Sheriff Mapes represents a more conservative form of white Southern masculinity, which becomes apparent not only in his behavior towards women, but also in how he acts towards the old black men. As soon as he arrives at Mathu’s house, he suspects that Candy “ha[s] something to do with all these people being here” (*GOM*, 65) and is annoyed by her interference with his investigation. He thinks she “make[s] a[n] [...] ass of herself” (175) and treats her with disrespect and hostility, “not look[ing] directly at her” but “[speaking] to her from the side” (65). More than once, the novel suggests that Mapes “probably would [...] hit her” (67). In his eyes, Lou “[isn’t] much of a man” (73) because he fails to control Candy and refrains from forcing her to behave by using violence. Altogether, Mapes is initially introduced as “big, mean, brutal” (85) and his first impulse when confronted with the gathering black men is to employ the outdated tools of Southern law enforcement, namely violence, intimidation and humiliation, to interrogate them. Although the novel reveals that “[he doesn’t] want to hurt [them]” and “[doesn’t] like what he [is] doing” (68), he feels like he “ha[s] no choice but to go

on with what he had started" (70). Being in his late sixties, Mapes represents an older generation of Southern white men, and his tendency to use violence against his inferiors indicates how he views manhood. When his old techniques show now effect because the old men remain indifferent and unshaken, Mapes is at a loss and "[doesn't] know any other way to get what he want[s]" (69) and fails to see "[w]hat's the matter with [them] all" (76).

In contrast to his much younger deputy Griffin, however, Mapes is willing to "surrende[r] to the demand of the old men to be listened to", and gradually gains respect for them by listening to their stories (Lambert 112). Having been around long enough to know about the history of the plantation and the black community's relationship with the Cajuns, Mapes wants to avoid "any trouble on this place" (*GOM*, 72) and any commotion in the city. Even though, he, like everyone else, "ha[s] never seen anything like [the gathering] before" (62), Mapes keeps a cool and logical head and gives precise orders to his deputies to keep Fix back at his bayou. He seems to have a clear idea of how to "handle [the situation] [his] way" (119), and when he learns that "Fix ain't showing up" (167), he is depicted as the "happie[st] white man" (169), because his plan to avoid a violent confrontation seems to have worked out.

In addition to knowing about the African Americans' and Cajuns' history, Mapes is also aware of the role that privileged whites like the Marshalls have played in their lives. During the gathering, he accuses Candy of "living in the past" (*GOM*, 73) and "want[ing] to keep [the old men] slaves the rest of their lives" (174). In contrast to Candy, who cannot accept being excluded by the men when they want to talk without her, Mapes is able to acknowledge the fact that he is no longer "in control" (103) anymore. While the old men reclaim their dignity by finding their voice in society again, Mapes becomes more and more quiet until he is reduced to mere animal-like "grunt[s]. Not loud. Quiet. He [is] starting to feel what [is] going on" (93). As Mary Ellen Doyle observes, "[t]hrough [the old men's] voices, the balance of power at Marshall has shifted" (*Voices* 186). The removal of Mapes' voice mirrors his loss of authority and power over the black men, which reaches its climax in his absence from the final fight. When Luke Will and his gang arrive at Mathu's house, Mapes tries to prevent the fight, but is shot by Luke and ignored by the black men when he orders them to remain in the house. Having been hurt, not only physically but also regarding his pride, Mapes seems to deem Luke and his mob not worthy of protection and acknowledges that the old black men are finally taking their lives into

their own hands. Consequently, Mapes resignedly puts Lou Dimes in charge and sulkily remains “sitting on [his] ass in the middle of the walk” (*GOM*, 213) until the fight is over.

Despite his initial violent techniques when interrogating the old men, I do not think that Mapes is a racist. On the contrary, I would argue that the novel depicts him as putting the law above the concept of race and color. As Raphael Lambert observes, “Mapes is more concerned with the strict application of the law than teaching black criminals a lesson” (122) and he is described as a proud man conscious of how he is perceived. “[W]hat would I look like taking something like that to Bayonne,” Mapes asks himself when interrogating Billy Washington aka Uncle Billy (*GOM*, 81). His pride is injured multiple times during the gathering when the old men refuse to take his orders and are not “even look[ing] at him. [...] [T]here ain’t nothing a white man hate more than for a nigger not to look at him when he speak to him” (103). Nevertheless, his ability to put aside his pride and grant the old men the chance to speak their minds demonstrates that Mapes is, in fact, one of the most complex characters in the novel. This is further emphasized by his amicable relationship with Mathu, his hunting- and fishing-partner whom he “ha[s] had a few drinks together” and whom “[h]e like[s]” (84). Though Mapes is initially portrayed as representing the old Southern masculinity based on violence and subjugation, he is later also depicted as open-minded and progressive. His acceptance of Charlie’s demand to be addressed as “Mister Biggs” and his growing respect for the old black men show that Mapes, as “a strong representative of [the] white society” (White 174), is capable of interacting with African Americans at eye level and demonstrates his willingness to and capability of living outside the concept of race.

While Sheriff Mapes demonstrates the ability to adapt his worldview to the changing society of the South, Luke Will illustrates what happens if a character remains “dependent on older methods of racial violence and hierarchy to jump-start a dying era” (T. Tucker 120). He and his gang represent “a dying breed” (*GOM*, 143) similar to that of Captain McBane from *The Marrow of Tradition* and the white slave patrollers from *The Known World*, and elicit the fear that a “younger generation of racists will assimilate into society in order to carry on the ideological beliefs of Fix’s generation” (T. Tucker 120). Luke Will and his friends are depicted as “big country red-necks” (*GOM*, 148), as white trash “think[ing] the world needs them” but not realizing that “[t]he world has changed” (143) and that for “[them] and [their] kind,

[the] time has passed” (148). The novel reveals that they make a living from doing “little jobs to keep things running smoothly in the parish” (159) by terrorizing and harassing the black community as a way to affirm their own position and identity. Thus, Luke Will’s definition of manhood relies on “his ability to make life hard for ‘niggers’ and to keep the parish segregated” (S. Jones 53). He was a good friend of Beau Boutan and ignores Fix’s decision not to retaliate against the black men at Marshall, but, as Valerie Babb observes, does so “not out of [...] love for Beau but out of his hatred for blacks and resentment of his own relative social impotence” (Babb 127). Before he and his gang go to Mathu’s house, they visit the local bar to get drunk, suggesting that they can only get “ready to kick [...] some ass” (*GOM*, 165) under the influence of alcohol. This impression is further reinforced when one of the boys “wonder[s] what them niggers been drinking to make them all so brave” (203) during the fight. Their own bravery quickly disappears when they realize that this time, the old black men are not going to back down and “hid[e] under the bed” (170) like they used to but are ready to fight back. Soon, the first of Luke Will’s boys is shot, and although it “[isn’t] bad, no more than a scratch, [...] he [is] sniveling like a gut-hanging dog” (202) and everyone except Luke Will himself wants to abandon the fight.

In contrast to the pathetic performance of the white attackers, the fight offers the old black men, and especially Charlie Biggs, another opportunity to realize that “[l]ife’s so sweet when you know you ain’t no more coward” (*GOM*, 208). Since Beau is dead and Fix does not show up, the men want to make Luke Will “pay for a lot of things” (195). Daniel White notes that “[w]hile the old men become warriors, Charlie becomes a general [...] [and] an intimidating presence to the white men” (175). Although Charlie is killed during the fight, too, he ascends to become a powerful symbol, “a hero and martyr” (White 175) for the old black men, who look at him “in awe, in fear” (*GOM*, 189) and gather around to “touc[h] him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on [them]” (210). Since until the fight, the black men have managed to reclaim their masculinity through dialogue alone, the final occurrence of violence does not represent the means by which they reclaim their manhood but the result of having already achieved it (cf. Mallon). Though they are ready to go home before Luke Will shows up, they have just regained their dignity and courage and are not willing to stand back and let themselves be subjugated by Luke and his outdated white supremacist ideas again.

In accordance with Suzanne Jones, I would therefore suggest that the fight underlines two opposing transformations. While Charlie, the “black ‘boy’ [...] becomes a man when he admits to shooting Beau Boutan”, Luke Will, “the white man [...] remains a ‘boy’ because he refuses to leave justice to the courts” (S. Jones 38). Another dichotomy appears in the form of the novel’s two endings, first the fight and then the courthouse scene. Jones reads them as “contradictory themes about violence and masculinity” (39). While she interprets the fight as “the only emotionally satisfying and manly way to resolve an argument”, the courthouse scene “reaffirms what Gaines has already proven in the novel – that talking can produce results” (S. Jones 39). Luke Will and his gang achieve neither manliness nor resolution. They act rough around people who are too afraid to stand up for themselves yet lack the courage to fight when they meet resistance. At the same time, they are depicted as incapable of resolving their issues by using language, as demonstrated by the scene at Fix Boutan’s house, in which Luke Will is mostly ignored. Their insecurity is exposed when they can only muster the courage to fight when drunk, and although they appear to be intimidating as a group, the description of individual members as having a “soft, girlish face and little red, girlish lips” (*GOM*, 167) subverts the image of masculinity they think they represent. In order to achieve a sense of manhood and superiority for themselves, they rely upon the subjugation and domination of others and hide behind old white supremacist claims like “[n]ext thing you know, they’ll be raping the women” (148) to justify their racial violence. I interpret Luke Will’s death during the fight as well as the judge’s verdict at the end of the novel as hopeful symbols that the days of Luke Will and his kind are finally over. As Raphael Lambert concludes,

the trial [...] questions the old racial equation and suggest[s] that there is hope for a change in the South. Although [...] the presence of the Nazi party, the Klan, and the NAACP at the trial is a reminder that racial tensions are still very much alive, the verdict is fair. (Lambert 121)

4 The role of women characters and the power of change

Considering that all works of literature reflect and reinforce the dominant ideology of a specific time, an examination of the representation of women characters as depicted in the novels of Jones, Chesnutt and Gaines promises to yield meaningful insights into the respective societies. From the threats of sexual exploitation of black women during the time of slavery over the quasi-invisibility of women in the public sphere during Reconstruction to the fight for the rights of black and white women during the post-Civil Rights Movement, women's experiences in the changing landscape of the South have arguably and inevitably had an impact on how they are depicted in the three novels under examination in this thesis.

Therefore, the following sections will now turn to analyze not only how women are represented in *The Known World*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*, but will also focus on the roles ascribed to them with regards to the formation and upholding of their communities. Quite generally, given the history of women's rights, it goes without saying that issues of race and economic power in the novels are inevitably complicated by issues of gender.

4.1 Derailing expectations in *The Known World*

In my analysis of male characters in *The Known World* (chapter 3.1), I argued that the men Jones portrays in his novel are often doomed to fail, no matter whether their intentions can be described as morally good or bad. By contrast, the following examination will reveal that the female characters in the novel are often depicted as succeeding, irrespective of the moral value of their actions. I have again narrowed down my analysis of characters and have tried to group them based on shared traits and values. In general, the representation of women characters in *The Known World* shows an array of strong individuals who often act independently of their male spouses and owners. Thus, I propose that the depiction of female characters often derails the reader's expectations of the role of women in the antebellum South.

The following sections analyze these strong characters and introduce them as white-identifying mistresses who exercise a patronizing form of owning others; as independent wives capable of change; and as underestimated slaves who, in the end, manage to truly free themselves from the oppressive institution of slavery.

4.1.1 White-identifying, patronizing mistresses

Among the female characters presented in *The Known World*, I would argue that the deceased Henry's wife Caldonia Townsend and her mother Maude Newman can best be described as white-identifying characters (cf. Ikard 67). While their skin color does not allow them to physically pass for white, Katherine Bassard notes that their "will to (white) power and privilege" suggests a "psychological and social dimension of the term ['passing']" (408). Both women own slaves, but their view of slave ownership differs. Maude, whose family has been free for generations yet had always been too poor to own even one slave, considers her property her most important legacy, and she stops at nothing to protect it. Her daughter Caldonia, on the other hand, has been brought up with about a dozen slaves to her family's name, and she has been taught that she is superior to them from the cradle. She views herself and Henry as just masters and generous caregivers whose slaves lead as good a life as their status as property allows. By contrast, the white Winifred Skiffington grew up in the North and refuses to own slaves when she initially moves to the South. Nevertheless, her treatment of the girl Minerva reveals that she has adopted a similar perception of mastery as Caldonia. Though at first glance, Caldonia and Winifred do not seem to share many similarities, the following section will illustrate how their exposure to the white supremacist doctrine of the south impacts their lives in a similar way.

Both Caldonia and Winifred are presented in rather conventional roles. Most of the time, they are depicted in the domestic space of their homes, taking care of chores traditionally ascribed to women. While Winifred's white skin and marriage to Manchester County's sheriff puts her in a rather powerful position, her character is only once depicted as influential. Following their wedding, Winifred declares to her husband that "slavery [is] not something she want[s] in her life" (*TKW*, 33). Although John agrees, the couple's conviction is soon put to the test when they receive the girl Minerva as a wedding present and decide to keep her because she "might be better off with [them] than anyone else" (34). At the wedding, Winifred is informed that "[a] woman, especially a married one, is nothing without her personal servant" (31), and while she denies owning Minerva "in the way whites and a few blacks owned slaves" (43), Paul Ardoin argues that by deciding to keep the girl and by creating the "fantasy" to take on the role of mother to her own property, Winifred "keeps existing

power relations completely intact" (644f.). While the Skiffingtons might not think of "their Minerva" as a servant, the girl is indeed assigned tasks in and around the house, is never properly educated and does not even know "north from south and east from west" (*TKW*, 166). Nevertheless, against her husband's wish, Winifred cannot help herself and teaches Minerva how to read. Ironically, her ability to read is what ultimately drives Minerva away from Winifred. Years after the sheriff's murder, the two women move to the North to live in Philadelphia, where "there is no reason for Minerva to participate in Winifred's fantasy world" any longer (Ardoin 644), and she abandons her pretend-mother. When Winifred frantically tries to "get her daughter back" with the help of posters, the phrase "Will Answer To The Name Minnie" makes Minerva realize that at least here in the North, she does have a choice and she refuses to go back to her maternalistic owner. Meanwhile, Winifred fails to realize how living in the South has tainted her way of thinking and speaking, because while she "love[s] Minerva more than she love[s] any other human being in the world", people in the South "just [talk] that way" (*TKW*, 382). I read the relationship between Winifred and Minerva as an example of how slavery is tied to love, and tragically demonstrates how the love between slaves and masters is intrinsically flawed, problematic, and unequal.

Just as "Minerva's identity is subsumed in, and sacrificed for, the identity of Winifred Skiffington", who is "nothing without her personal servant" (Mahurin 138), Caldonia Townsend's identity is equally dependent "on her slaves' complicity in white supremacist slavery ideology" (Ikard 80). Though her dark skin color excludes her from certain aspects of Southern life, such as simply buying a lace shawl from a white man's shop (*TKW*, 5), Caldonia's upbringing as a woman from the free-born black middle-class has led her to align herself and her identity to that of whiteness. As Bassard argues, Caldonia presents a form of psychological passing which has to do with "a will to (white) power and privilege as a way of mitigating blackness" (408). In order to distance herself from her human property, she "cross[es] a social line of demarcation that [...] amounts to a metaphoric passing" (408). Although the novel depicts her as a benevolent and kind mistress who even considers "some servants as confidants" (*TKW*, 182), Caldonia still profits from their exploitation. While for her mother Maude, the ownership of slaves and land present the most important legacy (180), Caldonia associates her role as mistress less with economic prosperity than with maternalism. Like Winifred, she too believes that she is only helping and

protecting the slaves under her care, and that she is able to guide them to a good life, something they would not be able to manage alone in her mind. By telling her abolitionist brother Calvin that she “cannot choose not to have [...] the responsibility of so many people”, the novel highlights that Caldonia “[can] not see any of those thirty or so human beings living as free people” (*TKW*, 291). Instead, she chooses to keep the myth of the happy Townsend plantation alive (Bassard 413). When she enters a sexual relationship with the slave Moses, who hopes to be freed and eventually become his dead master’s successor, Caldonia – consciously or not – uses her power as slaveholder to exploit Moses not only sexually but makes him affirm that Henry had been a “good master”. Once she feels her fantasy confirmed, she ends the affair and, despite her saying that she “love[s] Moses with his one name” (*TKW*, 292), she never frees him. Instead, she “ignites his emotional collapse [...] by parasitically ignoring his personhood and stakes in the relationship” (Ikard 80). Due to her psychological proximity to whiteness, Caldonia views the affair as “a kind of miscegenation” (*TKW*, 292) and realizes only much later that “she had been making love to another woman’s husband” (300). Similarly, she fails to look beyond the horizon of her own white-supremacist governed world when the first slaves start to run away and she “find[s] it difficult to believe that [anyone] would leave what she and Henry had made” (317).

Generally, I consider both Caldonia and Winifred to be rather static and passive characters who do not change or evolve much throughout the novel. To my mind, both women’s perception of the people under their charge as inferior and incapable of living free without their guidance is similar to that of other slave owners’ view of slavery as the guarantor of a stable world. Especially through the development of Winifred Skiffington, the novel demonstrates how the system of slavery leaves its toxic and horrific trace, even on originally Northern characters.

4.1.2 Independent wives capable of change

While the previous section concludes on a rather gloomy outlook, the following analysis will concentrate on two female characters who are depicted in a more positive light. Although Fern Elston and Mildred Townsend do not seem to have many similarities besides both being free blacks, a closer analysis reveals that both women display a certain personal development throughout the novel.

Presented as strong and independent women, the lives of both Fern and Mildred are heavily influenced by their experiences. Coming from at least four generations of free blacks, Fern prides herself on having such fair skin that she could easily pass for white. While she chooses not to because she never “car[ed] very much for white people” (*TKW*, 130), she nevertheless considers herself superior to those with darker skin and thinks of herself and other free blacks as “members of a free Negro class that, while not having the power of some whites, ha[ve] been brought up to believe that they [are] rulers waiting in the wings” (287). Education, I would propose, serves as the key to Fern’s identity and she considers knowledge and good conduct as necessary assets for distinguishing between free and enslaved. As a teacher for free blacks in Manchester County, Fern is rather unconventional in her lifestyle. She is well integrated into the free black middle-class community, and highly regarded even among the whites. Her social status enables her to teach most of the free black children, and she thus contributes to raising a new, educated generation of free blacks.

Unlike with Caldonia, Winifred or even Mildred, the novel does not ascribe one particular space to Fern but rather depicts her as constantly moving between places. Given her acclaim in Manchester County’s society, I would suggest that Fern is presented as the most powerful woman in *The Known World*. She demonstrates that the world of human property is not necessarily a men’s world, but offers anyone owning others the prospect of power. Although she owns only thirteen slaves while Caldonia has over thirty, the novel depicts her as a much more engaged and active mistress. Fern’s husband is a gambler and often away for weeks at a time, and even if he is at home, the novel suggests that he leaves all responsibilities to his wife. Like Caldonia and Winifred, also Fern shows traces of being a maternalistic mistress, having her slaves live in cabins so close to her house that the people of Manchester County joke that they are “neighbors who [happen] to be slaves” (*TKW*, 134). Despite her at times maternalistic attitude, David Ikard suggests that “Fern is an avid, if conflicted colorist who evaluates intellect, mortality, and personhood through a white supremacist ideological lens” (80). She admits that “freeing a slave [is] not in her nature” (*TKW*, 287), and though she does not like to inflict physical pain on her slaves, she is less concerned with their welfare than with economic calculations: “[f]or every whip mark [...] she estimated [the slave’s] value came down \$5” (259).

At one point in the novel, Fern reveals that “if [she] were in bondage [she] would slash [her] master’s throat on the first day” (*TKW*, 288). Her attitude resembles white supremacists and only changes after her encounter with the “obstreperous” (286) Jebediah Dickinson, a “pecan-colored”, fearless and intellectually sharp slave who totally derails Fern’s internalized beliefs. As Ikard argues, Jebediah “expose[s] the crisis of her investment in white supremacist ideology” by “defying her colorist expectations of racial inferiority and openly refusing to abide by socially mandated master/slave rules of engagement” (80f.). Though it is not in Fern’s nature to surrender (*TKW*, 250), the novel suggests that she feels intimidated by and even sexually attracted to Jebediah, something Fern, who has owned human beings all her life, can only verbalize in terms of property: “[w]ith him there [...] I feel as if I belong [...] him, that I am his property” (286). Her attempt to subdue him fails when he refuses to subject himself to her oppression, and Fern decides to set him free after he accidentally loses a leg. When she hands him his free papers, he hands them back noting a spelling mistake in the word “manumit”, which makes the reader question the teacher’s ability to raise a generation of free blacks without being able to spell the very word that means “to set free from slavery” (cf. Ikard 82). For Fern, however, Jebediah ignites a slow but significant change. The novel reveals that despite her life-long conviction to “[m]arry nothing beneath [herself]” (*TKW*, 74), she later marries a pecan-colored former slave (109) and even admits that she regrets the way she treated Jebediah, the only human being she “come[s] close to saying ‘I am sorry’ to” (260).

Compared to Fern, Mildred Townsend’s life could not have been any more different. Yet, by the end of the novel, Mildred is represented as a changed woman, too. After she is bought free from slavery by her husband, the Townsends move to the edge of the county to physically remove themselves as far from the institution of slavery as possible. Their dislike and mistrust of white people, and especially slave owners, is apparent throughout the novel, and even as free blacks they remain spiritually closer to the slave community than to their socially equal peers. When Caldonia, after Henry’s death, makes it clear that she will continue to run the plantation and not free any of the slaves, Augustus and Mildred “[know] all that [is] in the heart of the slaves” and actually go through the quarters “to offer their own condolences” (*TKW*, 65). Whenever Mildred visits Henry’s plantation with her husband, they choose to stay in the slave quarters instead of “stay[ing] in the house

their son and his slave had built" (66f.). However, the novel suggests that when Mildred travels alone, she does indeed stay in the house with her son (73). The reason for this is presumably that although the novel leaves no doubt that Mildred is against the institution of slavery, she is first and foremost depicted as a loving mother and wife and is forever caught between her husband and her son. When Henry reveals to his parents that he has become a slave owner, both are deeply shocked. Nevertheless, while Augustus is infuriated, Mildred's love for her son seems to be stronger than her own beliefs and values, and she puts them aside in his favor. Indeed, although she arguably had other things in mind for him, Mildred has always wanted Henry to "see what [he] had always been denied", reasoning that "the bigger Henry could make the world he live[s] in, the freer he would be" (113). After his confession, Mildred asks herself "where, in all she taught her son, was it about thou shall own no one, havin been owned once your own self" (137). Though she is certainly not happy about Henry becoming the very thing she and her husband have worked very hard to leave behind forever, Mildred is depicted as much more lenient with him than Augustus.

Although Mildred is willing to compromise her values when it comes to her son, her attitude towards the system of slavery as a whole is quite different. When they initially pick up Henry from William Robbins's plantation, Henry's surrogate mother Rita begs them to take her with them. While Augustus is too afraid about the consequences should they be discovered, Mildred hesitates only briefly and then persuades her husband to help the slave woman (*TKW*, 46). As I have suggested in chapter 3.1.2, the Rita incident presents the earliest instance of the Townsends' help to free slaves. Significantly, it illustrates that Mildred is not only clearly opposed to slavery but is also willing to actively work against it. Decades later, after Augustus's abduction, Mildred again decides to take an active stance for her beliefs when she helps the runaway Moses to hide at her house. She refuses to hand him over to Sheriff Skiffington and powerfully draws attention to the law's inability to protect rightfully free-blacks. Mildred's cumulated experiences, first as a slave, then as a free-black woman with few more rights than a slave since "[t]hem free papers [...] don't carry anough freedom" (113) manifest her place in the world of human property. When Skiffington comes to her place, she realizes that "it don't matter anymore" because "nobody cares" (306), and although the sheriff knows that "she [is] closer to the truth than [him]" (307), he wants her to surrender Moses nevertheless. Mildred,

however, has had enough. “No more. No more men from here. No more men from anywhere. Not one more” (364) she tells him right before he shoots her. After her death, hidden compartments for the Underground Railroad are discovered all over her house (377). Though the novel never provides an explanation, I would read Mildred as the driving force behind the installment of these compartments and the Townsends’ active involvement in the anti-slavery movement. The novel depicts her as a strong and courageous woman with the will and the means to help others. As the story unfolds, Mildred’s role evolves from being merely that of a loving mother and wife to actively getting involved in the resistance movement. I would even go as far as propose that her death sets in motion a series of events that change Manchester County irrevocably. After her death, the legal battle over her estate leads to a divide of the county’s community and to its eventual collapse. From this viewpoint, Mildred contributes to keeping the community of Manchester County together during her lifetime.

4.1.3 Marginalized and suppressed but ultimately free

Of the four female characters analyzed so far, only Mildred was born a slave and lived as such for the first twenty-six years of her life. As white or free-black middle-class women, Caldonia, Winifred, Fern and later also Mildred enjoy a somewhat privileged lifestyle. By contrast, this last section will now focus on two of the Townsends’ slave women who represent the most marginalized characters in the novel. Alice, “a woman people [say] ha[s] lost her mind” (*TKW*, 3) in an accident with a mule that kicked her in the head, is known all over the plantation as “Crazy Alice”. Celeste “ha[s] been limping from the first step she took into the world” (9) and ha[s] to endure a lot of mockery throughout her life. Despite their marginalized status, however, the following analysis will reveal the significant roles they occupy within the novel, particularly their importance for their community. Furthermore, the way these women are represented in the novel suggests that they have more in common than merely being marginalized slaves. Firstly, they are the only characters in the novel that are associated with music, Alice with her loud and crazed chants (12), Celeste with soft singing in the fields (285). Secondly, both are depicted as having a quieting effect on their surroundings. Celeste produces “a quietness and stillness” (98) in Elias, while Alice’s songs “cal[m] the horses and quie[t] the crickets” (13). Finally,

even though Celeste herself never gets to experience true freedom, the novel reveals that both characters have a lasting impact on the world they live in: Celeste's family line thrives after the abolition of slavery (353f.), and Alice, who manages to run away to the North, helping two other slaves to do the same, creates artwork that is described as "a map of life" itself (384).

Throughout the novel, Celeste is depicted as an inherently good character with "the best heart" (*TKW*, 79), and nothing but care and compassion for her family and, in fact, the whole slave community. "[A]lways wish[ing] for someone else [...] what she herself [can] not have" (82), Celeste is a vital part of the life on the Townsend plantation. Despite a "horrible limp" that "pain[s] most humans to see because they [think] is must pain her to move" (60), Celeste is depicted as a strong and "good worker" (60), and her ability to forgive is unparalleled. Even after she loses a child to premature labor because Moses the overseer would not allow her to rest in her cabin (326f.), she acts with nothing but kindness and honest concern towards him. In contrast to her husband, she does not let anger and hatred get in her way, and she is never blinded by power like so many other characters in the novel. As Stephen Marshall argues, she "confront[s] widespread violence with heroic acts of self-possession" and "yield[s] an indomitable self-discipline, which simply refuses the master/slave relation as such" (179). Even though she "ha[s] no love for Henry", she feels capable of "afford[ing] a little bit of charity" after his death, because she knows that "death ha[s] taken all his power" (*TKW*, 60). To my mind, Celeste has realized early on that all slaves are in the same boat, and that the only way to survive slavery is by showing love and compassion rather than seeking personal power and revenge.

Despite her kind nature, Celeste is simultaneously shown to reject the concept of "mastery" whenever possible. She refuses to address Henry and Caldonia properly as "Master" and "Mistress", but merely calls them "Mr" and "Ma'am" (*TKW*, 79) and is convinced that no slave should "make it easy" for their owners (335). When Elias is made overseer after Moses's disappearance, Celeste urges him not to do the dirty work for Caldonia. "If she want them workin so much, let her come out here and do it herself. [...] It just ain't right to go and do what they bought you for" (335). Through the character of Celeste, the novel stresses the slaves' vital commitment to community that is often forgotten in the various battles for power depicted in the story. In a way, Celeste represents a kind of moral compass which is illustrated near the end of the novel. When Elias accompanies the search party for Moses, he

suddenly realizes that his newly gained power as overseer has blinded him into thinking that he was safe from the white men's rage. As he himself desperately puts it, he "need[s] Celeste to tell him right and point him toward home" (373). Throughout the novel, Celeste emphasizes the importance of sticking together as a community of slaves, and not to betray each other. When Sheriff Skiffington interrogates the slaves after Moses's disappearance, Celeste refuses to tell him anything and implores her husband to do the same (266). Despite her own sufferings, Celeste's calm and kind attitude helps to keep the slave community on the Townsend plantation intact, and even keeps the maimed Moses alive at the end of the novel. "Celeste was never to close down her days, even after Moses had died, without thinking aloud at least once to everyone and yet to no one in particular, 'I wonder if Moses done ate yet'" (388). Her ability to show love and concern for a man that once inflicted so much pain on herself and the whole slave community is what Sarah Mahurin Mutter identifies as "a powerful force – and even an act of resistance – in a slaveholding society" (128).

Another act of resistance is performed by Alice, who is depicted as a madwoman for most of the novel. She herself claims that she was kicked in the head by a mule on her former plantation, but the novel's narrator knows better: "[H]er former master was terrified of mules and would not have them on his place, had even banished pictures and books about mules from his little world". However, since "[n]o one question[s] [her story] because [it] [is] so vivid, so sad" (*TKW*, 4), Alice finds herself in a unique position, and she makes the best out of it. Soon after arriving at the Townsend plantation, she starts wandering around at night, even walking beyond the plantation's boundaries. Since she always returns, Henry soon tells the annoyed slave patrollers not to mind her and leave her alone. In the few instances in which they do engage with her, Alice pulls off her "show" (13), disrespecting all social rules when she "call[s] the white men by made-up names" and even "grab[s] [their] crotches and beg[s] them to dance away with her" (12). Scared of the "crazy Negro slave", they decide interacting with her is "[v]ery bad luck" (13) and start to ignore her, just like the rest of the plantation's inhabitants seem to get used to Alice's peculiarities and pay her no mind. I read Alice as an incredibly smart and brave character who makes use of her position as an African American woman, "the most vulnerable and least threatening group [...] during slavery" (Ikard 77). Furthermore, by making up the mule story, she proves her immense "capacity for invention" (Berman 237). Undoubtedly, her status as a crazy person grants her more freedom

than any other slave in Manchester County, and night after night, Alice wanders around, pretending to be insane when the novel suggests that she is quite perceptive of her surroundings. As Paul Ardoïn notes, “[b]y feigning insanity, [she] places herself on the margins” of her community, and by “refus[ing] to stay where she is supposed to”, she gains “the most freedom of movement”, allowing her to expand “her own frontiers and rewrit[e] the boundaries of slavery” (Ardoïn 646). By simultaneously “acknowledg[ing] the power of boundaries while actively resisting them”, she “is challenging extant understandings of space, creating a new map” and “repeatedly toying with the codes of space in order to [...] set the stage for a true act of resistance. [...] She first masters the space, then rewrites it” (646). Unlike Celeste, Alice does not live on the margins because of an actual physical or mental deficiency, but because she actively and purposefully moves herself there.

Despite her alleged craziness, Alice is depicted as a strong and reliable worker (*TKW*, 13). By disregarding all sorts of boundaries, she practices her own quiet rebellion. Like Celeste, for instance, she never addresses Henry and Caldonia properly, but uses the form “Massa” or “Marse”, which “c[ome] up out of her like a call from a tomb” (59). As Susan Donaldson observes, Alice’s initially mad songs “turn out to be pointed critiques of the subjugation of human beings” as practiced by Henry, Caldonia, Robbins and all other slave owners (281). Generally, Alice is depicted as an exceptionally active character who is constantly on the move. Though through most of the story, her wanderings appear to be the useless habits of a crazy woman, by the end of the novel it becomes clear that they lay the foundation to her ultimate freedom. In fact, her wanderings are deliberate acts of getting to know her eventual escape route, preparing herself to not only get herself to freedom, but to guide two other slaves to the North, too. When Moses starts to suspect that Alice might not be crazy after all, he pressures her into running away from the plantation and to take his wife and son with her. Once in freedom, Alice discovers her art, which leads her to create true resources of “salvation” (Donaldson 281). Her two paintings on display in Washington, D.C., include everyone from the Townsend plantation, living and dead, all the people Henry was so dependent on to redefine himself as master. By creating a testimony to “community and mutuality” while disregarding strict boundaries, Alice highlights the interdependence of community, including both slaves and masters alike (cf. Donaldson 281). As Susan Donaldson further argues, “Alice’s [...] creations testif[y] to the central truths denied by slavery”, which are not

“the rigid separation of master and slave”, but their close intertwining (281). Through her art, Sarah Mutter Mahurin argues, Alice eventually manages to evolve from a mere “commodity”, whose worth is measured in “bad apples”, to an actual person. As Alice Night, she truly “gets over” slavery and her “thingness” and establishes her “first real human connection” (Mahurin 143). Like Celeste, she displays “forgiveness and communal belonging” through her acts and her art, and when her former owner’s brother Calvin Newman needs help at the end of the novel, she “d[oes] not send him away but be[comes] his new family” (Bieger 425).

4.2 Occupying untraditional spaces in *The Marrow of Tradition*

The analysis of male characters in *The Marrow of Tradition* (chapter 3.2) showed that most of the men’s actions take place in the public sphere. Carteret’s newspaper is a public organ of white supremacist ideology, Miller’s efforts to uplift the African American community revolve around his public hospital for blacks, and Green’s attempt to stand up for and defend the black community during the race riot takes place on the streets of Wellington. By contrast, I would like to draw attention to the fact that women characters are more often depicted as moving in and inhabiting private spheres in the novel. This, to my mind, inevitably leads to the assumption that the political, public sphere is allocated to the realm of manhood, while the domestic, private sphere belongs to the realm of womanhood. However, as the end of the novel clearly illustrates, the strict separation of public and private is neither possible nor fruitful, since neither space can exist without influencing the other.

The following sections will now turn to an examination of the female characters in *The Marrow of Tradition*, and will reveal how they are influenced by, and in turn also influence, both spheres in the novel. Therefore, I will first focus on the character of Polly Ochiltree to show how an independent and strong white woman poses a similar threat to the idea of Southern white manhood as African American men. I will then move on to examine Olivia Carteret as representative of old Southern domesticity and show her struggles to adapt to a new Southern culture. Finally, I will focus on Janet Miller as the untragic heroine of the story and analyze her complex relationship to Olivia, through which the novel expresses its optimistic hope of reconciliation between the races.

4.2.1 A woman of strong individuality with the spirit of independence

Compared to the other female characters in the novel, Polly Ochiltree is depicted as the most autonomous and, quite surprisingly, the most progressive woman in terms of her confidence and lifestyle. While black women like Janet Miller and the maid Mammy Jane enjoy significantly less liberties in the segregated South than their white counterparts, also the aristocratic Olivia Carteret is presented as decidedly less independent and altogether substantially weaker than Polly Ochiltree.

The childless Mrs. Ochiltree has outlived two husbands, unsuccessfully “tried [...] to secure a third” (*MOT*, 125) and is presented, despite her advanced age, as “a woman of strong individuality” (124). As such, she is known for exhibiting a kind of “dictatorial interference” (125) and “retain[s] a mild enjoyment” (22) of getting involved with the lives of her fellow Wellingtonians. After the birth of her niece’s son Dodie, for instance, she tries the patience of every member of the Carteret family with her multitude of suggestions (cf. 125), and upon learning rumors about her grand-nephew Tom’s obsession with playing cards and drinking, she does not hesitate to confront the young man’s sweetheart Clara with what she has heard (cf. 99f.). The most drastic act of interference, however, is Ochiltree’s expulsion of the maid Julia and her mixed-race daughter Janet after Mr. Merkell’s death, and her decision to hide the maid’s marriage license and Merkell’s will to the detriment of both, Julia and Janet (cf. 255ff.).

While Mrs. Ochiltree is described as having been a good and caring “second mother” to her niece Olivia and “ha[s] never been lacking in affection” (*MOT*, 176), the novel simultaneously ascribes her a startling frankness “that sometimes bordered on brutality” (22). Since she is rarely afraid to speak her mind, even if what she says frequently offends others, she is “more or less avoided”, and even feared, particularly by the novel’s white male characters (124). Samina Najmi attributes this avoidance, if not outright dislike, to the fact that as a self-assertive, strong and independent woman, Ochiltree “undermines the nineteenth-century ideal of ‘true womanhood’” (6). This, I would propose, makes her the prime representative of a progressive image of new Southern femininity. However, her strength, independence and capability of taking her life into her own hands and pursuing her own goals without regard for what society, particularly white male society, thinks of her, also poses a threat to “southern white male virility” (Najmi 7). Although this threat is less conspicuous than the

advancement of African Americans, it nevertheless impels the novel's white male characters to try and restore their desired social order. Najmi suggests that this is primarily done by introducing the concept of the "burly black brute" as a means to intimidate Mrs. Ochiltree and, in fact, all white women. By creating a gap between white women and African Americans, and in particular African American men, Southern white men recognize a way of maintaining their own superiority as protective gentleman while at the same time eliminating two potential threats to their manhood (Najmi 7).

Whether Mrs. Ochiltree is aware of this male strategy or not, she blatantly dismisses the daunting dangers originating from black men by claiming that she "[is] not afraid of any man that walks the earth, *black or white*" (*MOT*, 26, emphasis added), thus "identifying *all men* [...] as a potential threat to her person" (Najmi, 7, emphasis in original). While the observation that all men pose a potential risk to a strong woman like herself proves accurate in the course of the novel, it can neither save her from the fatal robbery turned murder, nor from the Big Three's subsequent exploitation of her dead body as a means to promote their white supremacist agenda. Upon the discovery of Ochiltree's corpse, Major Carteret does not hesitate to publicly condemn the crime as a vicious murder and sexual assault on a "sexless, defenseless" (Najmi 9) white woman by the hands of a black rapist "in the lowest human form" (*MOT*, 185). He seizes the opportunity to further widen the artificial gap between African American men and white women by "[r]aising the familiar war-cry of endangered womanhood" (Najmi 8). As the novel ironically illustrates, "[t]he anger of the people [is] at a white heat" (*MOT*, 219), and neither the fact that the sexless and defenseless victim is known as an independent "man-hunter" (260), nor the accused Sandy's reputation as a "very comical darkey" (24) rather than a burly black brute can change the public's hasty conviction and almost-lynching of the alleged murderer. Even the possibility that Sandy is innocent is fiercely dismissed by Wellington's white men who reason that "Mrs. Ochiltree was also innocent" (194). By balancing the life of a white woman against the life of an African American man, these two groups are once again alienated from each other. The thus created gender-race gap culminates in the revelation that the true murderer is a white man, who carefully disguised himself as a black man to commit a crime against a white woman. Najmi identifies the murder and the subsequent action as white men's attempt to use Ochiltree as a

tool to “underscor[e] the destructive manipulation of the white female body” (15) and to assert their own superiority and manhood.

At this point, it is noteworthy to draw attention to the fact that until her death, Mrs. Ochiltree is not depicted as a public figure, neither in terms of space nor influence. Spatially, her character is confined to merely move between her own house and that of her niece, displaying little action besides talking. Though I would argue that her often blunt and offensive remarks do have the power to impact others, her influence is restricted to the private sphere. For instance, after revealing the rumors about Tom’s sinful lifestyle to Clara, the young woman is severely unsettled by the news, but nothing changes publicly; Tom is neither held accountable, nor does their relationship change. Likewise, after relating to her niece the course of events revolving around her mixed-race half-sister Janet, Olivia is deeply distressed, but in the eye of the public, nothing has changed. Only after Ochiltree’s death, her female body is politicized by white men and “becomes merely a convenient pawn [to be put into] political use [...] in order to maintain both racial and sexual control” (Najmi 9). Remarkably, the revelation that neither Sandy nor any other black man, but indeed the white grand-nephew Tom Delamere has committed the crime, is never publicly communicated, nor is Tom ever convicted. Samina Najmi concludes that the “literal erasure” of Mrs. Ochiltree illustrates that “the white woman’s own self-preservation depends upon her reconfiguration of her relationship to African Americans, in whose ‘othering’ she has historically colluded” (15).

4.2.2 Old Southern domesticity

While the analysis of Polly Ochiltree’s strong, independent character exposed her as a threat to white masculinity, her niece Olivia Carteret shows how white womanhood can present a safety net for Southern white patriarchy. By relating how her husband, whose aristocratic family had lost everything in the war, can only succeed in the New South after gaining access to Olivia’s wealth through their marriage, the novel illustrates how white men seek to rescue themselves from their patriarchal crisis through the white woman (cf. Najmi 4). While “[h]e had tried in various pursuits to gain a foothold in the new life”, Carteret succeeds only after “[winning] the hand of Olivia [...], whom he had seen grow from a small girl to glorious womanhood” (*MOT*, 2). Since his own “ancestral home [had been] swallowed up in the common ruin”, the

Carterets live in Olivia's house, and it is *her* money the major uses to establish the *Morning Chronicle* (2). However, the major's need for rescue does not stop there, since as the last of his line, his "dearest hope" is "[t]o have children to perpetuate the name of which he [is] so proud, to write it still higher on the roll of honor" (2). It is quite literally through Olivia's body, then, that Carteret "rescue[s] his ancestral line from extinction" (Najmi 5). Incidentally, the major is not the only male character who tries to save himself through a white woman. Tom Delamere, too, hopes to eliminate his financial and social troubles by marrying the rich Clara Pemberton. In doing so, "both [...] Carteret and [...] Delamere seek to reassert their identity as white men through the [...] control of white women" (Najmi 5).

The previous section revealed how Polly Ochiltree refuses to be controlled by any men throughout her lifetime, and how her death renders her defenseless against being used by white men to further their own goals. In contrast to Ochiltree's progressive lifestyle, Olivia's is depicted as rather old-fashioned. Her view of marriage as "the most serious concern of life [...] to a right-thinking woman" and her perception of her marriage certificate as "the token of her own and her child's claim to social place and consideration" (*MOT*, 263) do not only seem antiquated, but also ironic in light of the fact that it was *her* wealth and social standing that uplifted her impoverished husband. From the novel's very first page, Olivia is depicted as a physically and mentally weak character and altogether fragile figure who is constantly "on the verge of collapse" (73), "anxious" (152), "very much disturbed" (254), "troubled" (265), and "ill at ease" (267). Before the in any case difficult birth of her son, Olivia "suffer[s] from a nervous shock" (2), the first of many throughout the novel, and, barely surviving the delivery, never fully recovers her strength (46), which "had never been great" (267) anyway. Thus, throughout most of the novel, Olivia is either confined to her bed due to her "delicate health" (13), or otherwise worried about her son's well-being. Besides occasional visits to her aunt and a family outing to the seaside, at which she seems to spend her day merely sitting on the hotel's veranda, Olivia is depicted as rather immobile throughout the novel. Even the description of her and her husband's house suggests that her life has not been characterized by a lot of movement. "In this very room she had first drawn the breath of life; it had been their nuptial chamber; and here, too, within a few hours, she might die [...]" (2).

Her immobility, however, gives way to surprising swiftness at two occasions in the novel. The first occurs when Olivia is informed about her aunt Polly's murder, upon which "[m]ore than one motive [...] lend[s] wings to [her] feet" and she "[runs] immediately [...] to the scene of the tragedy" (*MOT*, 176). Though shocked by the sudden death, Olivia primarily hopes to be able to find and secure the documents her aunt has long ago stolen and hidden from her father, at which she eventually succeeds, thereby revealing her father's secret, but legitimate marriage to his black maid. The second occasion, then, is depicted at the very end of the novel, when her son is in danger of suffocating and her husband's attempt to convince Dr. Miller to attend to the young patient fails. While Major Carteret succumbs to the brutally but just logic of the situation,

Mrs. Carteret [does] not stop to reason. In such a crisis, a mother's heart usurps the place of intellect. For her, at that moment, there [are] but two facts in all the world. Her child [lies] dying. There [is] within the town, and within reach, a man who [can] save him. With an agonized cry she rushe[s] wildly from the room [...] fl[ies] down then long stairs like a wild thing [...] and fle[es] precipitately out into the night. (*MOT*, 322)

This time, too, Olivia's previous immobility and weakness is suddenly replaced by extraordinary determination and animalistic speed. Although the concern for her son's health is undoubtedly inspiring her sudden physical strength, her complicated relationship to Dr. Miller's wife adds to her agony, too. The complication in their relationship is caused by Olivia's "keen sense of abandonment, feeling that her father chose a life in sin with a black woman over her" (Najmi 11f.) and her uncertainty about the legal claims the mixed-race half-sister might have to her own inheritance. Consequently, her father's failure to raise her and to acknowledge his marriage to and child with a black woman prompts Olivia to treat Janet with nothing but hatred and rejection.

I would propose that the relationship between these half-sisters is based on the same white male-motivated principle as identified in the analysis of Polly Ochiltree's murder. In both cases, white men attempt to alienate white women from the African American community to further undermine their own manhood and superiority. Samina Najmi suggests that in contrast to Mrs. Ochiltree, "who suffers no remorse at the treatment of [the maid] Julia, Olivia has a conscience which fights against generations of social conditioning" (13). Upon discovering the marriage license and last will of her father, Olivia contemplates whether it would be morally

justifiable to continue keeping them a secret, or whether, as a “good woman [...] [who] would not [do] a dishonest thing” (*MOT*, 264), she is obliged to grant her half-sister a share of their father’s heritage, even if that means that she herself has to renounce some of it. When she arrives at the conclusion that “[s]ome time in the future, [...] she [will] present to the hospital [of Janet’s husband] a sum of money equal to the amount her father had meant his colored daughter to have” (272), it is already too late. The riot that ultimately destroys the hospital has already started, and in its path of destruction causes the shortage of available medical professionals that could save her son’s life. “Cast[ing] off all pretensions of white supremacy” in order to save him, Olivia’s “maternal instinct hurls her across the racial divide” and forces her “to acknowledge her kinship to her black sister, as well as her injustices towards her” (Najmi 14). While a child in mortal danger could be perceived as a private problem, I would suggest that the circumstances of the riot render it a public, and thus a political one, giving Olivia “the political potential to the white maternal body” (14). The public conditions which complicate her child’s survival are the product of her husband’s political agenda, and thus lift the problem of the dying child as well as the long overdue confrontation of the two half-sisters from the private to the public sphere. As Susan Danielson argues, “the novel suggests [that] true healing of the disease [of racism] [...] can only take place under domestic largesse rather than professional surveillance” (77). The resolution, then, depends on white women’s willingness to reconsider their relationship with the African American “other”. In order to save Dodie, the “proud white” (*MOT*, 324) Olivia must put “her personal grievance against the negro race” (25) as well as her selfishness aside and “thro[w] herself [...] at the feet of a negro” (324). By revealing the truth about their mutual father and Janet’s legitimacy, Olivia finally grants her black sister the “sisterly love” (328) Janet has always longed for. In acknowledging that she herself has failed as “a good woman” (267), Olivia “recognize[s] that the ideal type of womanhood [...] is embodied in her ‘dark’ Other” (Knadler 437), and although Janet rejects the “sisterly recognition” (*MOT*, 329), she symbolically “ca[tches] and sustain[s]” her weak sister by allowing her husband to save Dodie’s life (329).

4.2.3 The untragic mulatto

The idea of Janet as the “dark Other” of Olivia is prominent throughout the novel in the frequent depictions of their physical resemblance by other characters. Dr. Miller describes Olivia as “[a] lady [...] so near the image of his own wife [...] [a] little older, perhaps, a little fairer of complexion, but with the same form, the same features, marked by the same wild grief” (*MOT*, 323). Olivia’s maid Mammy Jane observes that they “favor one anudder” [...] ez ef dey wuz twins” (106; 8), and Janet herself reveals that “people have taken [her] for [Olivia] on the streets” (328). In addition to these physical characteristics, the novel suggests that Olivia and Janet lead parallel lives, albeit with different social backgrounds and in different racial worlds. At the time of the novel, they are both married to socially respected, influential and wealthy men, and are both mothers to only sons. While the Carteret family inhabits Olivia’s “fine old house” (2), the Millers live in Major Carteret’s old family mansion, which had to be sold after the war (8). Despite these similarities, however, Janet and Olivia live in entirely different racial realities. Though they share the same white father who raised neither of them, the white Olivia, “rich by right of her birth” (66), spends her childhood with her aunt in aristocratic wealth, while the mixed-race Janet is brought up as an orphan “by the hand of charity” (328). Interestingly, despite Olivia’s privileged and Janet’s unprivileged position, it is the former that lives in constant grief about their father’s secret, not the latter. Janet, despite all the hardships caused by her poor childhood and status as a person of mixed-race, and despite having been denied legitimacy throughout her life, “is not angry” and “could never bear malice” (66). Furthermore, she “could [...] lov[e] this white sister, her sole living relative” and “yearn[s] for a kind word, a nod, a smile, the least thing that imagination might have twisted into a recognition of the tie between them” (65).

Her character, and most importantly her ability to act, makes Janet Miller the “hero [...] of the novel” (Knadler 436). I would suggest that her character first and foremost embodies the conflict between black and white which is so prevalent throughout the novel, and which is further highlighted by her “mulatto” appearance. In the antebellum South, a person of mixed-race traditionally carried the proof of the relationship between slave and slave-owner, which was usually an expression of white masculine domination and power over African Americans. In the case of Janet, however, the novel depicts her mixed race as a sign of her father’s weakness for

using her mother as a shield to protect him from Polly Ochiltree. Her mother Julia, on her part, “ma[kes] marriage a condition” and “[i]n a moment of weakness, [Merkell] [takes] her away to a place where [they are] not known, and marrie[s] her” (*MOT*, 261). Afterwards, he is too ashamed to acknowledge this marriage, and until the white daughter Olivia discovers the marriage license and her father’s last will, it remains a secret. As a result, Janet “ha[s] received no [...] inheritance,” but “ha[s] been fortunate” (66) nevertheless. She is well-educated and finds an “honest man” (328), with whom she lives in the white world of the North and Europe. Upon returning to the South, Janet finds herself in the middle of the racial tensions. Living a somewhat separate existence from her lesser or entirely uneducated black neighbors yet lacking the purity to be welcome in the white world, Janet’s mind and body themselves become the site of racial tensions. Being of mixed-race, Janet displays a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, she embodies a “distasteful subject” (25) and potential threat to the racial superiority of white people, and especially her half-sister. On the other hand, she simultaneously represents the possible hope of a peaceful reconciliation between the races, which is highlighted at the end of the novel.

Having lost her only son in the violent riot instigated by her sister’s husband, Janet “tower[s] erect, with menacing aspect, like an avenging goddess” over Olivia, who “st[ands] in the attitude of a trembling suppliant” (*MOT*, 326). She arguably has every right to deny her sister’s pleas to save the life of her son, so Janet’s final verdict comes as a surprise to both Olivia and the reader. Having been depicted as primarily seen but not heard throughout the novel (cf. Danielson 76), her now “command[ing]” and “imperiou[s]” voice resonates with even more power:

[Y]ou [...] left me nameless all my life! Now, when an honest man has given me a name of which I can be proud, you offer me the one of which you robbed me, and of which I can make no use. For twenty-five years I, poor, despicable fool, would have kissed your feet for a word, a nod, a smile. Now, when this tardy recognition comes, for which I have waited so long, it is tainted with fraud and crime and blood, and I must pay for it with my child’s life! [...] I throw you back your father’s name, your father’s wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them, - they are bought too dear! [...] But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have your child’s life, if my husband can save it! (*MOT*, 328f.)

Possessing “a tender heart” (*MOT*, 65), Janet sanctions the rescue of her sister’s son, thereby proving that “Chesnutt believed women to be morally superior to men” (Mohr 423f.). Until this point, Janet’s character did not attract much attention besides

being the darker double of the white Olivia. By redirecting the decision and responsibility of saving the Carteret child from Dr. Miller to Janet, however, “Chesnutt shifts the authority for the resolution [...] from male to female” (Danielson 76) and “empower[s] [Janet] to construct and reconstruct [her] personal and political realities” (Mohr 442). As a woman of mixed-race, Janet embodies a strong signal for imminent change and emerges from the novel’s tragic turn of events not as “avenging goddess”, but as “subtle agen[t] of change” (423f.). By rejecting the symbolic whiteness that Olivia offers through her “sisterly recognition”, Janet takes on the role of “the ‘untragic’ mulatto” and “unsettles the structure as well as the content of race” (Knadler 443). She realizes that this long hoped for recognition comes too late and most likely not out of sincerity, but out of desperation, since “[i]f it [will] save her child, [Olivia] [will] shrink at no sacrifice” (*MOT*, 327). By rejecting her sister’s whiteness, yet “giv[ing] [her] [her] child’s life” (327), Janet performs an act that “has no exchange-value” and “subverts the circuit of exchange” (McGowan 71). As Todd McGowan observes, Janet “give[s] something for nothing, and cannot be repaid”, thus “occasion[ing] a rift in Olivia[’s] symbolic universe”. In other words, Janet’s act “disrupts” (71), and it does so in more than one way. It disrupts the privileged and selfish world of Olivia, who fails to comprehend how Janet could possibly reject her white heritage. It also disrupts the white supremacist world of Olivia’s husband, whose claim that “[t]he best negro is a black negro, of the pure type” (*MOT*, 246) it powerfully rebuts. Finally, it disrupts Janet’s own husband’s assimilationist and accommodationist world, which is based upon the notion that the “good negro” will eventually be rewarded by white society.

Through the mixed-race female character of Janet Miller, the novel advocates for a reconciliation between the races for the benefit of Southern society. Janet, as the most prominent representative of “the younger generation of colored people”, has neither “the picturesqueness of the slave, nor the unconscious dignity of those to whom freedom has been an immemorial birthright” (*MOT*, 42). She faces the prejudices and oppression of her time with a “new biracial consciousness” (Knadler 438). Therefore, as a mulatto character, Janet threatens racial boundaries and eventually emerges not as “a victim but the redeemer of white society” (441).

4.3 Girls with ‘spunk’ in *A Gathering of Old Men*

As the title suggests, *A Gathering of Old Men* is first and foremost concerned with its male characters. Seen from this angle, the analysis of the novel in chapter 3.3 has revealed a broad array of different approaches to and articulations of masculinity, and closely linked them to the cultural heritage of the men. Nevertheless, there are a handful of female characters whose presence in the novel is well worth examining in closer detail, too. Considering works like *Catherine Carmier* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), Gaines’s depiction of women characters, and especially of black women, “reveal[s] individuality and a compelling sense of strength in dealing with the world” (Gaudet 140), and I would propose that the women depicted in *A Gathering of Old Men* are no exception.

In the following sections, I will now turn to an analysis of the different roles Candy, Beulah and the other women occupy in the novel and will show how they contribute to or influence their community. Therefore, I will first highlight the conflicts created by white maternalism and the incapability of privileged whites to deal with the burden of their unwanted legacy. Then, I will focus on the representation of fear through the characters of Miss Merle and Janey, before turning to Gaines’s trademark of strong black women in the final section.

4.3.1 White maternalism and the burden of an unwanted legacy

While at its core, *A Gathering of Old Men* is undoubtedly concerned with the old black men’s struggle to reclaim their manhood and dignity and the action of the novel is arguably triggered by Charlie’s act of shooting Beau, it is important to note that the gathering itself is initially instigated by the white Candy Marshall. Candy is about 30 years old and, together with her aunt and uncle, she owns Marshall plantation. Since neither Beatrice nor Jack take any interest in their ownership, responsibility for the plantation and its residents is entirely left to Candy. When she discovers Beau’s dead body in Mathu’s yard, she, like everyone else, believes that Mathu is the killer. Having been raised by Mathu after her parents’ death, Candy is “closer to him” than to anyone else (GOM, 19), and her affection for Mathu now leads her to claim responsibility for killing Beau and to ask the other old men to do the same. Her idea

is to gather as many of them as possible in Mathu's yard and to have them carry twelve-gauge shotguns and empty number five shells to slow down, if not altogether prevent, the sheriff's investigation.

By claiming to have shot Beau herself and trusting that "Clinton [her lawyer] can handle Mapes in court" (*GOM*, 16), Candy fully relies on her position as a white woman and plantation owner to be sufficient to protect herself and, most importantly, "[her] people" (19) from harm. While I will return to the conflicting reliance upon her white privilege in more detail below, I want to briefly highlight the strength of Candy's character at this point. Admitting to a killing and standing up not only for her own rights and beliefs, but for those of other people as well, demonstrates that Candy represents a brave and strong female character. Despite her physical appearance as "a little, spare woman, not too tall" (50), Candy boldly defines her personality "without regard for traditional standards" as an independent woman, "liv[ing] by her own values" (Babb 124) and not "need[ing] anybody" (*GOM*, 58). In the eyes of her society, she "[wears] the wrong clothes", has her "hair [...] cropped too short for a young woman" and shows no interest in "catching a man" (*GOM*, 15). By defying these traditional notions associated with womanhood, by "biting her lip [...] want[ing] to cry" but holding back the tears and remaining strong instead, and by repeatedly standing up to Mapes, not fearing any consequences, Candy proves that she "[has] got spunk" (22). When the sheriff starts to slap the old men to force them to tell him the truth, "every last person in the yard and on the porch [...] [begins to form] a line up to [him]", and Candy stands "at the head of the line", telling him that "[she's] next" (71). While her boyfriend Lou remains silent because he does not want Mapes "[to knock the] hell out of [him] and [throw him] in the back of his car" (67), Candy is not afraid and "[s]tand[s] [her] ground" (175).

Initially, Candy's desire to protect "her" people, meaning Mathu and the other black men, appears compassionate. As the novel progresses, however, her motives become less and less genuine and her personality is revealed to be more conflicted than merely being a strong and fearless white woman who stands up for the rights of the black community. Valerie Babb observes that Candy's upbringing by Miss Merle and especially Mathu "afford[s] her an understanding of black culture to which one of her social position might not be privy" (Babb 124). Nevertheless, her ability to use "that Marshall way of looking at you" (*GOM*, 95) indicates that Candy is well aware of and maintains the superiority awarded to her by belonging to the upper white class, and

she demands to be treated accordingly. When the old men exclude her from the meeting inside Mathu's house, Candy's façade as the self-proclaimed "savior" of black people (*GOM*, 174) starts to crumble.

'Nobody's talking without me,' Candy [says], coming back toward the garry. [...] '[W]e don't want you there this time.' [...] That stopped her. Nobody talk[s] to Candy like that – black or white – and specially not black. 'What the hell did you say? [...] You know where you're at? You know who you're talking to?' [...] Candy [is] mad now. She [is] so mad she [is] trembling. She trie[s] to make Clatoo look down, but Clatoo [won't] look no farther down than her eyes. [...] 'Y'all can go on and listen to Clatoo if y'all want,' she [says]. 'But remember this – Clatoo got a little piece of land to go back to. Y'all don't have nothing but this. You listen to [Clatoo] now, and you won't even have this.' (*GOM*, 172f.)

Reminding them of who is in charge at Marshall, "[looking them] dead in the eye, daring [them] to think otherwise from what [she] want[s] [them] to think" (*GOM*, 50), Candy threatens to evict the old men should they dare to go against her. As this passage reveals, the "love" for her people is conditional (Carmean 114) and requires their subordination to Candy's control. Despite her claim that "[n]obody is a slave here" (*GOM*, 174), her behavior around and attitude towards the black men mimic that of her slave-owning ancestors. She views the men as "black and helpless" (66), and her reference to them as "her" people is exposed not to depict communal belonging but to signify possession. She wants to protect "her" people like "[her] daddy and all them before him did" (19), which illustrates Candy's belief in "social dominance based on skin color. Though [she] express[es] sympathy for the conditions of black characters [...] [she] nevertheless operate[s] on an assumption of [white] privilege" (Carmean 113).

What Candy fails to see is that her maternalistic attitude and well-meant protectionism only further contribute to the black men's emasculation, restricting their freedom and inhibiting their self-actualization. By acting like their protector, she "[does] not recognize their full and complete existence as men" (Babb 126), and prevents them from reclaiming their manhood, dignity and independence. In a way, Candy wants the old men to remain as impotent as the empty number five shells they bring on her request. She neither notices that the men have brought extra shells and secretly reload their guns, nor that they – armed or not – do not need her protection any longer but have finally managed to take their lives into their own hands again (cf. Carmean 111). That she is unable or unwilling to comprehend what is happening on the day of the gathering becomes most apparent through her relationship to Mathu.

Everyone on Marshall “know[s] what Mathu mean[s] to that family, and specially to her” (GOM, 50), since, as a kind of surrogate father, Mathu represents Candy’s last connection to her parents and her past. Considering the plantation as “nothing but a few miles of dirt [...] without [Mathu]” (176), Candy is clearly not as attached to the place and land as the black community but feels at home there only because of Mathu. Her declaration that “[he] knew [...] [t]he first Marshall. [...] [He] knew them all” (176) further evokes the impression that Mathu presents Candy’s only link to her ancestors and is also the source for her “sense of responsibility to everyone remaining on the plantation” (Carmean 114). When near the end of the gathering, “Mathu cover[s] [Candy’s] hands with his big old ashy, gray-black hand and pull[s] her free” (GOM, 176), he demonstrates that he has been aware of Candy’s restraining force on his and the other men’s self-actualization. His decision to “go back with Clatoo and the rest of the people” (213) after the trial ultimately seals his “change [of] allegiance to the men” (Carmean 114). His “newfound respect for [them] [presents] a clear stepping stone toward a progressive and inclusive southern identity and landscape” (T. Tucker 122).

Candy, on the other hand, “remain[s] the same” (Carmean 114). She “is faced with the challenge of leaving [her] social identity” as a privilege white maternalist to “fully [adopt] a personal identity that [...] allow[s] her to [...] recognize the sovereignty of the men” (Babb 126). Her behavior, however, suggests that she is not up to the task yet. She “doesn’t want to understand” why “Mathu’s turned his back on her” (Gaines qtd. in Doyle, *Interview* 171), and when Lou explains to her in the car that “[t]hat old man is free of [her] now,” she starts trembling and slapping him because she cannot accept the truth of what he says (GOM, 184). That her maternalistic attitude remains unchanged manifests itself by her repeated claims that she killed Beau, that “[she] did it” (184). She “push[es] her way through the crowd where [Mathu] [stands]” during Charlie’s confession (187) and does not “really [understand] why Mapes [speaks] to her” when Charlie demands to be addressed as “Mr. Biggs” by the white people (187). To her, “[w]hat [...] matter[s] [is] that Mathu [is] free. She [does] not care about anything else” (187), yet she still does not realize that her protectionism of him contradicts his freedom. To my mind, Candy’s character does not change. That she searches for Lou’s hand at the end of the novel represents “a gesture of need” (Carmean 114) more than an expression of love, because she feels abandoned by Mathu and fails to see why.

Candy is not the only white character in the novel who remains to live by past values and fails to adapt to the changing society of the South. This becomes most apparent when examining the role of her aunt, and by extension also her uncle. While Candy exerts an overly control over the plantation and “her” people, Bea and Jack Marshall are depicted as doing the exact opposite. Though the plantation belongs to all three of them, the latter two refuse any responsibility for it and take generally no interest in what is happening around them. Valerie Babb observes that, as “the last remaining members of the Marshall clan, [they] are symbols of the eroding status quo” and “are bending under the weight of their family’s slaveholding legacy” (Babb 123f.). As shown above, Candy’s way of dealing with this burden is to resume a maternalistic role towards the black community. Her aunt and uncle, by contrast, have made it a habit to remember the past, “and then drinking to forget” (Babb 124).

Both Bea and Jack are in their seventies and do nothing but “[g]et up and drink. Take a little nap, wake up and drink some more. Take another little nap [...] like clockwork. Don’t give a damn for nothing” (*GOM*, 154). The chapter narrated by the bar owner Tee Jack explains their behavior, attributing it to the fact that they “never wanted none of this. Never wanted to be responsible for name and land” and deny that “[they have] no niggers. [...] Never had any niggers. Never wanted any niggers. Never will have any niggers” (158). In my opinion, the old Marshalls represent the failure of the white upper class to comprehend and resume responsibility for their past, and the past of their family. They seem to be overwhelmed by their “responsibilities as plantation owner[s] and social leader[s]” (Carmean 104), and drink to “induce a stupor that inhibits [them] from making sense out of the senseless order that fetters [them]” (Babb 124). While they drink out of “[f]eeling guilty about this, guilty about that” (*GOM*, 154), they mostly feel guilty over their family’s past and their involvement in the slave trade. That they are free to drink and sleep at any time of the day without any consequences underlines the corruption of their white privilege. As Karen Carmean observes, “[n]othing on Marshall Plantation claims their labor or care” since they have long ago passed on their responsibilities to their niece (114).

When Beau is killed, Jack merely states that “[he doesn’t] have any [trouble]” because “[t]hey belong to her,” referring to Candy and the black men (*GOM*, 159). Both Bea and Jack appear ignorant of their surroundings and have managed to

distance themselves from life in general, and life on their plantation in particular. Though Bea seems to grasp the severity of the situation in the quarters, she makes it clear that “[she doesn’t] care what’s happened” (21) and neither of them does anything to defuse or prevent the impending danger. Quite on the contrary, Bea appears even mildly entertained and offers Miss Merle her help in coming up with names of people “[w]ho don’t like Fix” (24) as a kind of game during her “pea pickers” (21). Carmean summarizes the case of Bea and Jack when she observes that

[t]hough the Marshalls [...] remain above conflict, they have really created it and support its continuance because it favors their dominance. As long as the central conflict [is] between Cajuns and blacks, Jack and Bea [...] can appear isolated and superior [...] enjoy[ing] their position at the top of a social hierarchy, a position that accords them respect and service from others without their having to show any regard for other people. (Carmean 114)

While they drink because they cannot handle their family’s past participation in the world of slavery, their behavior nevertheless suggests that they still rely on the power of their family’s name and the social status that accompanies it. In fact, the only time that Bea seems to become fully engaged in the present is when she feels that her authority as a Marshall is undermined. When Miss Merle tells Bea’s maid Janey not to move, Bea “look[s] up at [her]” and tells her that “[t]his is not Seven Oaks, Miss, this is Marshall. At Marshall I say ‘don’t’ and I say ‘do’” (GOM, 21). Similarly, Jack relies on the untouchable air of his social position as a Marshall when he visits Tee Jack’s bar, where “[h]e talks sometimes; most times he’s quiet and moody. The rest of the customers, no matter how long they’ve known him, won’t start a conversation” (152) because they know that he “[doesn’t] like for [them] to speak to him unless he [speaks] first” (162). Despite their desire to dissociate themselves from everything, Bea and Jack insist on respect and think of themselves as superior, and thus uphold the old values associated with their family name. However, they refute any responsibility and even though they are repeatedly challenged for their failure to exercise control – by Miss Merle, by the professor in Tee Jack’s bar and even by Mathu prior to the time depicted in the novel – they remain unimpressed and unaffected. Though Jack claims that “[he’s] been paying [his] share seventy years already”, the Texan professor reminds him that “[t]he debt is never finished as long as we stand for this” (163). His intentional ignorance of the truth behind the professor’s statement further highlights his and Bea’s lack of action, which, as the novel suggests, they appear to have perfected over the years.

4.3.2 Female voices of fear in times of crisis

At a first glance, two other women seem to occupy similarly ineffectual roles in the novel. A closer examination of the Marshall's black maid Janice Robinson aka Janey and their friend Myrle Bouchard aka Miss Merle, however, reveals that while they have only minor roles, they significantly contribute to setting the men's gathering in motion. Additionally, they are the only female narrators in *A Gathering of Old Men*, which necessitates their inclusion in this analysis.

Both their chapters appear at the beginning of the novel and are concerned with spreading the news of Beau's death. Janey is the first to learn about the murder and is instantly "scared. [...] 'That's what I heard?' she ask[s] [...]. [S]he look[s] like she want[s] to cry. 'That's the shot I heard?'" (GOM, 8). She reacts to the news that a black man has killed a white man with utter horror, because she "know[s] what this mean[s] [...]. Means Fix coming here with his drove" (8). To my mind, Janey's reaction by and large resembles how the old black men would have reacted themselves before Beau's death offered them a last chance to reclaim their manhood and dignity. That they now act more bravely than anyone would have thought becomes apparent when Miss Merle drives through Marshall quarters and does not see any people. The novel reveals that she thinks of them as "little bedbugs [...]. Just [...] frightened little bedbugs now" and is genuinely surprised to discover them gathered in Mathu's yard with shotguns in their hands. She "had never seen anything like this in all [her] life before, and [she isn't] too sure [she is] seeing it now" (14). While she can barely believe what she is seeing, she can definitely not believe what she is hearing. Candy repeatedly tells her that "[she] shot Beau", but Miss Merle, who helped raise her, can see right through her claim because "[she knows] when she [is] lying to [her], and [she knows] she [is] lying to [her] now" (GOM, 15). Though she feels "[she] ought to [...] get away from here" (19) and is "disgusted" (125) by Candy's plan to gather more men, Miss Merle also knows that she "wouldn't, couldn't leave" (17).

Grudgingly, she accepts Candy's plea for help and returns to Marshall house, where she finds Janey as hysterical as before. The black woman is beside herself with fear, and cries and whoops and bawls "like a lunatic" (GOM, 23). While she reaffirms herself that "[she's] strong" (22) and manages to follow first Candy's, then Bea's and finally also Miss Merle's orders, she is incapable of making her own

decisions and emits an overall “sense of powerlessness” (Carmean 107). Janey “know[s] Fix” (*GOM*, 8) and her fear of his violent retaliation against the black community renders her utterly helpless. Like everyone else’s fear of Fix, also Janey’s is of course based on past experiences, and like her white employers, I read Janey as living in the past, too. As Marcia Gaudet observes, her job as the Marshalls’ maid affords Janey a more prestigious position as a “go-betwee[n] or contac[t] across racial lines” (148). While other black characters’ appearances are described as “dusty” (*GOM*, 127) or wearing “[a] dress that could have been blue or purple once [...] [but] had faded to a dull gray” (62), Janey is depicted in “a white dress and white shoes and an apron” (6). Her neat outer appearance is complemented by her insistence on the boy Snookum’s manners. When Candy sends Snookum to inform Marshall house about Beau, he stands in the flower garden, “call[ing] Janey from the gate”, provoking her fussing because “the Major and Miss Bea [are] in there trying to sleep”. She insists that Snookum “say[s] ‘Mr. Lou,’ and [...] ‘Miss Candy’”, because “[she doesn’t] care how libbel they is, you still a child. You say Mister and Miss round me” (8). When he finally tells her about Beau, Janey mimics the behavior typically associated with whiteness by “grab[bing] [him] in the collar” and “rais[ing] her hand to hit [him]” (8). As a black woman working in the home of a white family, she has “access to [her] white employers on a more personal basis” and “[has] no illusions about [them] and certainly no false admiration” for them (Gaudet 148). She knows, for example, that, no matter how worried she is about what is going on at Mathu’s place, turning to Bea is “like talking to the wall”, and Jack is “already drunk out there on that front garry” (*GOM*, 10). When Bea orders her to make her another drink, she retorts “Don’t I have enough trouble already, Miss Bea?” (24). She has long ago learned what it means to be a black woman on Marshall plantation, and while she is watching Bea searching for pecans with a stick in her back yard, she is certain that “[i]f anything bite that old woman, they’ll blame [her]” (*GOM*, 11). Waiting for Miss Merle to arrive on the day of Beau’s death, she is therefore left with nothing but her frantic prayers. “Lord, Jesus, help me. [...] Lord, have mercy” (10). Despite her crying and apparent helplessness, however, it is important to note that it is Janey who comes up with the names of the old men that will ultimately gather at Mathu’s house. While Miss Merle “[knows] most of the history of that river and of that parish” (23), it is Janey who “can remind [her]” of “what Fix has done to [the] people around here” (18) and, most importantly, she knows how to reach them.

For Mary Ellen Doyle, both Janey and Miss Merle represent “the voices of fear; intense, experienced, knowing, and credible” (*Voices* 185). While the novel depicts both as scared, Miss Merle’s “position as a member of the white ruling class and the esteem afforded her by this position” (Babb 118) nevertheless helps her to remain in control of herself and take charge of the situation. The means by which she achieves both are based on the same racially coded techniques as Sheriff Mapes’s when he interrogates the old black men at Mathu’s. Miss Merle “tak[es] out [her] frustration on [Janey]” by “grab[bing] her in the collar and slap[ping] her two or three times”, then threatening to “start slapping some more” when Janey is on the verge of crying again, and priding herself on having “two of the strongest hands in St. Raphael Parish” (*GOM*, 23). Though she is aware that she is “being unmerciful”, she “[doesn’t] care. If [she is] going to be in it, then they all would be in it. And if [she] ha[s] to slap [Janey] around to let her know she [is] going to be in it, then that [is] just too bad” (24). Miss Merle’s behavior on the day of Beau’s death makes it almost impossible to believe that she once “raise[d] [Candy] as a lady” (129). Though she now condemns how that “crazy [...] white gal” (23) dresses, looks and acts, Miss Merle, too, seems to forget about how to conduct herself in a ladylike fashion. In addition to slapping Janey, she swears when she learns of the murder – “Oh, shit” (13) – and when she tries to make Janey tell her about who does not like Fix – “Speak up, dammit” (25) – and she rudely tells her friend Bea to “shut up” (23).

The day of the gathering, however, affects her in more ways than just in her manners. Returning to Mathu’s house in the late afternoon, Miss Merle is depicted as disregarding the racial code of hierarchy when she “[doesn’t] come up to Mapes, or Candy, or [Lou] first” but “[starts] dishing out sandwiches to the first person she [comes] to [...] [feeling] that since [they are] all conspirators together, one [is] no better than the others” (*GOM*, 125). Similar to Candy’s maternalism, Miss Merle, too, feels a certain responsibility toward the people on Marshall. While she claims that “[they] can all do what [they] want” (128) and questions “God’s reason for putting her here at the same time He did the rest of [them]” (127), the fact that she returns to Mathu’s house with “neatly wrapped” sandwiches (125) and personally distributes them “to the different people who [look] hungriest to her” (127) suggests that she cannot stop to care for Candy, Mathu and the rest of them. This is further emphasized by the way she looks at Mathu. While the novel stresses that she, like all “Southern women, black or white, can look at you like [...] [she’s] thinking that you or

[she], one of you, should not be standing on the same planet at the same time" (125), she looks at Mathu "[n]ot in the way a white woman is supposed to look at a black man when giving him orders or advice", but in way "any woman would look at any man when they have shared more than a few moments together" (128). I would argue that just as she "took it as [her] duty to raise [Candy]" (127) back then, Miss Merle now takes it as her duty to take care of the people in Mathu's yard.

4.3.3 Black female rebellion

The issue of duty is also important for the remaining female characters of the novel. One of the most important themes throughout Gaines's literary work is the representation of the elderly black women who have significantly contributed to Gaines's own upbringing in Louisiana. Since "[he] was around older women much more than [he] was around the men" (Gaines qtd. in Gaudet, and Wooton 225), it is unsurprising that not only his own life, but also that of his black women characters has been heavily influenced by his great-aunt and her friends. While most of his works feature older women characters at their center, however, *A Gathering of Old Men* is, already by virtue of its title, a book dedicated to his male characters. Nevertheless, there are three examples of elderly black women in the novel who, although their role is arguably little, represent the typically strong black women readers of Gaines have become acquainted with.

After discovering Beau's body, Glo Hebert aka Aunt Glo and Corrine are among the first persons Candy turns to for help. Standing in Aunt Glo's front yard, she is calling her because she needs Glo's grandson Snookum as a messenger to tell "Rufe and Reverend Jameson and Corrine and the rest of them to gather at Mathu's house right away" (*GOM*, 5). Beulah Jackson, "Rooster's big wife" (51) is already informed when her husband is still "picking up pecans behind the quarters," and she "call[s] for him" to let him know that "[he has] to go find a shotgun somewhere" and go to Mathu's with her (180). Thus, the novel suggests that the black women on Marshall plantation are Candy's first point of contact and, like Janey and Miss Merle later, are used to spread the news of what has happened. Even though they are not the focus of the novel, the black women function as the voices of their community and, by taking part in the gathering, too, they manifest their role as the binding elements of the African Americans still living on Marshall plantation.

Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton observe that the black women in Gaines's fiction appear to "[have] the sense that this place in the quarters [is theirs]" and can "operate there fairly securely" (226). It is no surprise, then, that the women have already taken their place in Mathu's yard even before most of the men arrive. "Glo Hebert, Hazel Robinson, and [...] Beulah Jackson, [are] all sitting on the steps. Glo ha[s] her three little grandchildren next to her side [...] and [...] Corrine [...] [is] sitting in the rocking chair on the garry" (*GOM*, 51). As demonstrated by Corrine when she "get[s] [Candy] a sheet or something" (62) from Mathu's house, the old women are at home in the quarters on Marshall plantation and navigate the place effortlessly. Quite generally, they "seem to be much more in control of their world than [...] the older men" (Gaudet, and Wooton, 225), and particularly Beulah and Glo demonstrate their strength, independence and fearlessness throughout the novel. Though Glo is "worried about what might happen if Fix [comes] there [...] she [is] proud of [the old men] all being there now" (*GOM*, 51). Since the novel depicts her as strict and intimidating, especially towards her grandchildren, I read her recognition of the men and their bravery as particularly meaningful. When they relate their stories to the people gathered in Mathu's yard, the men "[turn] to Glo" repeatedly for support. "[Tucker] turned to Glo. Glo nodded her head. She know[s] what he [is] talking about" (96) and offers him affirmation. Similarly, I would argue that Beulah's interjections, like "Amen" (86) and "I hear him [...]. He's making sense" (90) during the men's speeches are meant to acknowledge the old men's struggle to come to terms with their pasts and to help pave the way for their final recovery of their manhood and dignity. As "a key witness" (Clark 203) to the men's transformation through dialogue, Beulah's voice is coming "from the steps" (*GOM*, 86; 90), signaling that the black female voice in *A Gathering of Old Men* is put in the background, but is not "render[ed] [...] invisible" (Clark 203). In order for the old men to finally make themselves heard, it is necessary for the women to take a step back, to literally go back to "the steps," because their voices are stronger and are "heard first". When Gable starts to speak, Rufe "[doesn't] hear [him [...]. He [speaks] so softy you [have] to be right on him to hear him. *It [is] Glo [he] hear[s] first*" (*GOM*, 100, emphasis added). Before him, Johnny Paul speaks to the sheriff about the things he "can't or don't see" (88), and Mapes turns to Beulah to "tell [him] in English what he's saying in Gri-gri,". Beulah, however, merely responds "Let him tell you [...]. He talks good as I do" (90), thereby reaffirming Johnny Paul's and the men's capability to speak up for

themselves. Their positive affirmations are not reserved for the black men, though. When Candy “[is] standing in the door with her hands on her hips”, trying to stop the old men from talking without her in Mathu’s house, Beulah tells her to “[s]tand your ground, honey” (125). Later, when Candy “[goes] out to the walk and [stands] there with her arms folded”, the first to follow her is Beulah. She “[leaves] the steps and join[s] Candy on the walk. [...] Then everybody start[s] joining in. Glo and her three little grandchildren. Even Corrine manage[s] to get down the steps and come out in the yard” (172). Through their voices and actions, the black women support the gathering and create a powerful sense of community, evoking the idea of “one big happy family” (110).

While Beulah and Glo grant the men the opportunity to talk, the novel also shows that they have the power to reject that same right. Beulah tells Reverend Jameson repeatedly to “just shut up” and that “[n]obody [is] listening to [him] today” (GOM, 56). She cuts Mapes off mid-conversation to give Johnny Paul the chance to speak, “You was saying, Johnny Paul?” (90) and tells him that “[he] better warn that boy [...] if [he] want[s] him around much longer” (109), referring to Mapes’s deputy Griffin. Being depicted as strong and powerful, Beulah and Glo “come to stand with the men and speak up just as defiantly” (Doyle, *Voices* 182). As soon as the men’s storytelling subsides, Beulah lets the sheriff know that “any woman here [...] can tell you things done happened to women round here make the hair stand on your head” (GOM, 105). As if taking her cue, Corrine, whom “[n]obody expect[s] to hear anything from” suddenly breaks her silence. “That river, that river [...] [w]here the people went all these years. [...] Done gived us food, done cleaned us clothes, done cleaned us soul. St. Charles River – no more, though. No more. They took it” (107). While she appears distant and lost in her own thoughts throughout most of the day, her sudden outburst reflects what she has been musing about the whole time. She seems stuck in the past, her thoughts particularly revolving around the river which once represented life to her suffering people, especially the women who “washed” and “cleaned” there, but now it is “no more”. “Most of [them] [have] forgot she [is] even there” during the gathering (107), and with her unexpected yet powerful speech, Corrine wants to make sure that nobody forgets about all the black women who have suffered in the past or suffer in the present.

When Corrine resumes her position as a “straight and lifeless [...] scarecrow” (GOM, 51) and continues to ignore Mapes, who tries to downplay Fix’s “share of dirt”

and abuse of the black community, it is Beulah's turn to speak, and she calls the sheriff out for making excuses:

'Now, ain't that just like white folks?' Beulah [says] [...] still looking at Mapes. 'Black people get lynched, get drowned, get shot, guts all hanging out – and here he come up with ain't no proof who did it. The proof was them two little children laying there in them two coffins. That's proof enough they was dead. Least to black folks it's proof enough they was dead. And let's don't be getting off into that thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago stuff, either. Things ain't changed that much round here. In them demonstrations, somebody was always coming up missing. So let's don't be putting it all on no thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago like everything is so nicey-nicey now. No, [Fix's] seeds is still around. Even if he is old now, the rest of them had their hands in some of that dirt.' 'Then you know more than I do,' Mapes [says]. 'When it come to the kind of dirt been slung in this black woman's face – yes, sir, Sheriff, I reckon I do know more than you do.' (GOM, 108)

Though they are arguably granted far less space in the novel than the old men, Corrine and Beulah are not willing to remain completely silent and briefly usurp the conversation to provide a powerful glimpse into her own sufferings. When Mapes threatens "to take [them] to jail" (GOM, 108) both Beulah and Glo are not impressed. While Glo tells him that "[she's] ready to go [...] [and] [will] find somebody to look after them children", Beulah assures him that "[she'll] be ready [...] [because she] been in the pen before" (109). Even when Mapes tries to humiliate and dehumanize Beulah by promising to find her "a dress [she] can wear [...] [and] a bucket and a mop, too," Beulah demonstrates her unshakable dignity by boldly responding that "[she] ain't no stranger to buckets and mops [...] [h]oes, shovels, axes, cane knives, scythe blades, pickets, plows – and [that she] can handle a gun, too, if [she has] to" (109). Though as shown above, black women in *A Gathering of Old Men* are often put in the background to allow the old men to be in the spotlight, Gaines nevertheless "retrieves them from the margins" and makes them "an integral part of the gendered speech community" of the black men (Clark 203f.) by granting them to share their stories, too.

The "dialectic showdown with Mapes" is not the only occasion in which Beulah's interaction "borders on physical confrontation" (Lambert 112). Especially Reverend Jameson repeatedly manages to provoke the old jailbird, who is not afraid to demonstrate her willingness to use physical violence. When she tells the reverend to "shut up", Jameson starts towards her, but "Beulah [is jumping] up from the steps and [is] waiting for him. She ha[s] balled her fists, and now she [is] winding them over and over, waiting for him. [...] 'Come on, come on, you bootlicker [...] I'll whip you

crazier than you already is, or I'll put some sense in your head'" (*GOM*, 105). Though arguably in a different way, also Aunt Glo is depicted as capable of using violence. During the gunfight, Snookum disregards her orders and slips away through the door of Mathu's house into the yard. Though "[t]he people [are] still shooting and hollering", the prospect of his "Gram Mon" to "beat [him] for not answering her the first time" (200) scares the boy more than the possibility of getting shot.

Despite their at times intimidating appearance, however, Beulah and Glo are both also depicted as caring. During the gunfight, Glo is frantically "calling for her little grandson Snookum" (*GOM*, 198) and is altogether depicted as a strict but well-caring grandmother to her three little grandchildren. When Gable starts to tell his story, Glo gently warns him, "Careful, Gable. You know your heart. Careful, now," and "reach[es] out her hand to touch his arm" (100). After another man, Tucker, finishes his story, "Beulah [gets] up from the steps and [...] [leads] him back. They [sit] down, and she put[s] her arm around his shoulders, holding him like [...] a little child" (97). Their concern for the old men and their presence during the gathering demonstrate the black women's significance in caring for and holding the black community on Marshall together.

5 Conclusion

By analyzing the depiction of men and women in the three novels by Jones, Chesnutt and Gaines, this paper has tried to examine how the male characters perceive and follow different notions of manhood and configurations of masculinity. Furthermore, the examination of the novels' women characters has shed a light on the various roles they occupy in the three narratives, and how their presence influences not only the male characters, but their communities as a whole. By looking at the representation of gender configurations symptomatic of different time periods, the analysis provided in this thesis draws a richly detailed and varied picture of race and gender relations in the changing landscape of the US South. Below, I will now provide a condensed summary of the main findings of chapters 3 and 4, and will attempt to compare and contrast the previous analyses of *The Known World*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *A Gathering of Old Men* to demonstrate that

despite the oppressive and hard conditions of slavery, the dashed hopes of Reconstruction, the disenfranchisement of the Jim Crow era, and the significant but limited gains of the civil rights movement, African Americans have played and continue to play a significant role in the history and culture of the South [...] [and show how] issues of race, class, and gender stratification have played pivotal roles in their struggles for social justice, equity, and cultural identity. (Baer, and Jones 1)

Moreover, I will show how the white communities presented in these novels enhance or inhibit the social advancement of African Americans, and how their willingness to accept and act upon social change contributes to a resolution of the tensions between the races.

While both Chesnutt and Gaines wrote their novels in close proximity to the times depicted in them, it is important to point out that Jones's *The Known World* was written and published a good 150 years after the time depicted in the novel. Therefore, while I consider *The Marrow of Tradition* and *A Gathering of Old Men* as genuine attempts to represent the society of their respective time periods in their respective local settings, one must keep in mind that Jones's novel is not based on the author's own authentic experiences but has its roots in fictionalized historical records of the time of slavery. Despite this note of caution, however, for the purpose of this paper, I have treated the representation of characters in all three novels as symptomatic of their time periods.

Starting with the analysis of male characters in chapter 3, the first novel treated was Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*. As I have illustrated, the Virginian society depicted in this novel during the time of slavery is largely governed by the system of human property. Therefore, also the characters' notions of manhood are mainly based upon ownership of both slaves and land, as well as upon exerting power over others. While I have shown that there is a social order that defines the hierarchy within the society of Manchester County and the South in general, the order is based less upon the concept race, i.e. skin color, than upon the concept of owning others. Although they do not fully enjoy the same privileges as their white counterparts, black slave owners are nevertheless depicted as being largely accepted within their community and are usually considered to be of higher social status than non-slaveholding whites.

As I have demonstrated, most of the male characters in *The Known World* are presented as ultimately failing, irrespective of their social, economic, or racial position or the moral value of their actions. I have suggested that their often tragic destinies can be linked to their conscious or unconscious support of the system of slavery, a system which is in itself doomed to fail. For a male character in Jones's world, the only prospect of success and true freedom lies in the conscious rejection of slavery and the capability of true love. Therefore, power-hungry individuals like William Robbins, Henry Townsend and Moses, who act merely upon self-interest, are shown to be ultimately punished. Similarly, while Augustus Townsend and Sheriff John Skiffington are presented as likable characters throughout most of the novel, their good intentions eventually go terribly awry. Augustus's open scorn of the system of slavery is somehow contradicted by his actions, since he unconsciously contributes and strengthens the prevalent system by acknowledging, not challenging its boundaries. Skiffington, on the other hand, has privately sworn to never own slaves, yet works daily to enforce slavery's laws as the county's sheriff. I have revealed his hostile attitude towards Mildred at the end of the novel as symptomatic of the toxic effects of the system of slavery upon its society.

In contrast to these altogether failing individuals, the characters of Elias Freeman and Stamford Crow-Blueberry have been shown to be ultimately succeeding. Elias is presented as a loving and caring father whose whole world revolves around the well-being of his family. As I have suggested, his ability to truly love others enables him to transcend the boundaries of the system that oppresses

him and lets him establish his own set of values and priorities. Stamford, on the other hand, is initially presented as a kind of lost soul who hunts one young woman after the other in his vain search for freedom. By the end of the novel, however, he has changed and rearranged his values. He has become capable of loving and caring for his community, and his reward is not only that he will eventually survive slavery but will actually significantly contribute to his African American community after the war.

In contrast to the society depicted in *The Known World*, I have illustrated that the society in *The Marrow of Tradition* is heavily influenced and characterized by the concept of race, since the color of a person's skin is depicted as the main factor for determining their social status. Furthermore, social hierarchy in Chesnutt's novel is largely based upon the notion of class, i.e. a character's ancestry and their economic wealth, which also governs the intra-racial hierarchies. The novel was written at a time when the white-supremacist worldview governed large parts of Southern society and inevitably influenced the perceptions of the concepts of manhood and masculinity. Within this turn-of-the-century setting, Chesnutt illustrates how the North Carolinian town of Wellington fosters racial tensions through the advancement of white supremacy based on widespread, officially legitimized racial discrimination and oppression. As the narrative highlights, Wellington's society favors the white above the black population and perceives African Americans as innately inferior, no matter how well they have managed to advance economically. Through the representation of all his characters, I have suggested that Chesnutt draws attention to the question of how a person's experiences in the South have an influence on their belief system.

I have shown that most white characters in the novel are suffering from a deep-rooted fear of the advancement of African Americans, which leads them to support, first cautiously, then fiercely, the white supremacist ideology and creates a form of toxic white male hysteria. Blinded by the rising racial tensions they themselves have helped instigate, characters like Major Carteret, General Belmont and Captain McBane are unable to realize it is not the advancement of African Americans they need to fear, but the ongoing decline of their highly valued white aristocracy. In this regard, I have exposed Tom Delamere as the embodiment of this decline and have suggested that his character raises questions about the claimed superiority of the white race in general.

As representatives of the younger generations in the South, the black Dr. William Miller and the white Lee Ellis both come from liberal families and are depicted

as slowly replacing the outdated notions of white aristocratic ideals. Little by little, they will create a whole new tradition of the middle-class gentleman without any regard for the color of his skin. By returning to the South and building a hospital for his African American community, Miller is the key representative of supporting the advancement of his race. In a similar way, Ellis displays a certain sympathy to black rights and is depicted as attributing more value to the truth than to social bias. However, as I have shown, both men's privileged positions within their communities create a certain gap between them and their less privileged peers, and instead of using their ascribed power to actively speak up against the oppression of African Americans, they choose, out of fear for their own social standing, to keep silent.

Among the least privileged characters in the novel, the analysis has revealed a gap in their views of manhood. While Josh Green has been shown to embody the heroic, manly black militant fighter who is neither afraid to speak his mind nor to stand up to white men, the subservient characters Sandy Campbell and Jerry Letlow represent the old generation of devoted black servants who seek protection by their white employers in exchange for subjecting themselves to the white race.

The subjugation of black characters and, more importantly, their late decision to finally stand up for themselves, is the central issue of Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*. The characters' discourses and ideologies illustrate the need for lasting change. Though the novel is set over a hundred years after the time depicted in *The Known World* and a good 70 years after *The Marrow of Tradition*, the impacts of slavery upon the Southern society are still present. While the societies of the previous novels are based on the notions of owning human property and white supremacy, respectively, I have suggested that the Louisianan rural society of *A Gathering* is based on the notions of heritage and culture and the impending threats of being displaced and eventually erased. While *The Known World* is set in the South, the North functions as the image of "the promised land" and is chosen by many runaway slaves and freed blacks as an escape route out of the system of slavery. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, it is suggested that the more privileged blacks, like the Millers, return to the South again with the aim of helping their less fortunate community. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, it is now indicated that the older generation of African Americans have remained in the South despite their constant mistreatments, because they feel a close connection to the land they and their ancestors have previously worked on.

I have illustrated how Gaines dismantles the traditions of suppressed black masculinity in the South and lets his characters establish a new mode of masculinity based on dialogue instead of violence. The black men in *A Gathering of Old Men* earn a sense of manhood by creating a dialectic community in which they can seek and offer themselves absolution from the burdens of their pasts. Through dialogue, they manage to challenge the still prevalent racial codes of their Southern community and rediscover their own identities as independent men who are able to take their lives into their own hands at last. As shown in chapter 3.3.1, the men use a dialogue of equality as a means to reclaim their manhood and their masculine power. In order to fully realize the newly gained confidence in their masculine identities, they demand acknowledgement from the white community. As illustrated, the men's transformation and self-actualization can only be completed once Sheriff Mapes, as the representative of white power, realizes their newfound manhood and accepts them as equals.

Although the old black men have long been deprived of their manhood, the depiction of how they reclaim their dignity, find their own voice and have that voice finally and sincerely acknowledged by white people demonstrates that signs of racial reconciliation begin to come to the fore. This is further emphasized by the character of Gil Boutan, who, as a young Cajun, embodies a new generation of educated, open-minded whites who advocate the hopeful reconciliation between the races and racial harmony in the South.

Turning to the representation of women characters and how they are portrayed in chapter 4, then, the analysis has shown that all three authors chose to introduce strong and independent women among an array of diverse female roles presented in their novels. As shown in the examination of female characters in *The Known World*, the women are often depicted as succeeding, irrespective of the moral value of their actions. Most of them are presented as strong individuals capable of acting independently from their male spouses and owners and are thus often derailing the reader's expectations regarding the role of women in the antebellum South.

The black but white-identifying Caldonia Townsend and the white Winifred Skiffington are portrayed to exhibit a kind of patronizing form of ownership, and they are represented as rather static characters not capable of change. Though Winifred has been born and raised in the North, the novel illustrates that the little time she

spends living in the South is enough for her to fall prey to the toxic influence of the South and the system of slavery.

The free-black characters of Fern Elston and Mildred Townsend are presented as strong and independent women. By the end of the novel, both have demonstrated that they are capable of change. As a former slaveholder herself, Fern questions the legitimacy of the institution of slavery, and Mildred becomes actively involved in helping slaves escape. By standing up to Sheriff Skiffington without any regard to her own safety, she demonstrates her strong belief in the rights of the black community.

As I have indicated, the most marginalized and least privileged black women characters appear as the novel's true heroines. Celeste Freeman and Alice Night are elevated at the end of the novel as they manage to truly free themselves of the oppressive system of slavery. Celeste is depicted as the driving force on the plantation and helps to keep the slave community together. She has long ago realized that the only way to survive slavery is to leave differences aside and not seek personal power over others but stay united as one people instead. Alice, on the other hand, is revealed not to be crazy after all. She has cleverly used her underestimated position as a mad slave woman to find a way out of slavery, and, most importantly, she manages to take two other slaves with her.

In a similar way, a black woman also appears as the heroine in *The Marrow of Tradition*. In contrast to the women of the previous novel, the women in Chesnutt's work are depicted as generally more privileged. From the higher-class women like Olivia, Polly, Janet and Clara, none are depicted as working but are mainly tasked with taking care of their children and running the household. Consequently, they are often confined to the private spaces of their homes. On the other hand, only the lower-class black women Mammy Jane, the maid Julia and the Carterets' new nurse are presented as working. I have suggested in chapter 4.2 that the female characters in *The Marrow of Tradition* appear to be less impacted by the prevalent racial tensions in their society. Although the leading white female characters Olivia Carteret and Polly Ochiltree share the general prejudices against African Americans, they are not depicted as troubled by them to the extent that their male counterparts are. Quite generally, I have observed that the issues the women characters face throughout the novel are more of a private than a public nature. Polly's hatred of Julia concerns the private sphere, as does the complex relationship between Olivia and Janet. As I have shown, however, this changes after their deaths, as in the case of Polly, or with the

riot's path of destruction, when their seemingly personal problems are lifted onto the public stage.

Olivia Carteret is depicted as almost exclusively confined to her house, and therefore largely immobile. At the end of the novel, however, her immobility is replaced by extraordinary swiftness when she tries to save her son's life. By contrast, Janet Miller represents an independent woman of mixed-race who often moves between private and public spaces. The novel suggests that she is a proud woman, and powerfully rejects the whiteness offered by her half-sister at the end of the novel. As I have illustrated, by performing an act without exchange-value, Janet symbolically uplifts her race and provides hope for future generations of African Americans in the South.

Finally, despite what its title suggests, I have shown that *A Gathering of Old Men* includes a handful of strong and influential women characters of both races. Privileged by her position as the offspring of a white family of plantation owners, Candy is certainly the most powerful female character in the novel. Though she initially appears to act in the best interest of the African Americans still living on her plantation, the novel eventually exposes her as exhibiting a maternalistic attitude and a sort of protectionism that, in fact, only further contributes to the old men's disenfranchisement. By contrast, the black women depicted in the novel provide an important source of emotional support for the old men. Beulah, Glo and Corrine stand as important symbols indicating that men are not the only members of the black community who fight for freedom and dignity. They represent a strong sense of community by participating in the gathering and by affirming the men's stories. Through offering their own stories, they draw attention to the way African American women have suffered and still suffer from racism, and by expressing their faith in the men, they indicate their hope for true progress and change in the South.

As this thesis has shown, each of the three novels introduces and treats different kinds of conflicts. All of them are ultimately connected by a focus on the struggles of men who want to achieve manhood, and strong, unconventional women who keep their communities together and express hope for sustainable social change. While I would argue that all of the novels end on the prospect of an unknown, yet hopeful future, it has yet to be determined whether their hopefulness regarding a reconciliation of the races in the US South is justified, or not.

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7 Appendix

7.1 English Abstract

This thesis explores the notions of manhood and configurations of masculinity as presented in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). Furthermore, it examines the roles that women characters occupy in these novels and aims to demonstrate their influence on the development of their male counterparts and their contribution to the creation and upholding of their communities. Since the narratives of these novels cover the time span from the time of slavery over the post-Reconstruction era and well into the late 1970s, a strong focus of the close reading provided in this thesis lies on the interplay between race, class and gender configurations as symptomatic representations of their respective time periods within the larger context of the US South.

137 words

7.2 German Abstract

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Darstellung von Männlichkeit, sowie die präsentierten Frauenrollen und den weiblichen Einfluss auf die Entwicklung von Männlichkeit und die Bildung und den Zusammenhalt von Gemeinschaften in den Romanen *The Known World* (2003) von Edward P. Jones, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) von Charles W. Chesnutt und *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) von Ernest J. Gaines. Da die drei Romane inhaltlich die Zeit der Sklaverei über die Reconstruction und danach bis weit in die 1970er Jahre umfassen, wurde bei der Analyse der Charaktere ein besonderer Fokus auf das Zusammenspiel von Rassentheorie, Klassenzugehörigkeit und Geschlechterkonfigurationen gelegt. Die Ergebnisse stellen somit eine symptomatische Repräsentation der untersuchten Gesichtspunkte für die jeweilige Zeitepoche im geografischen Raum der US-amerikanischen Südstaaten dar.

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