ABSTRACT

CHARLES BLACKBURN
Imaging Character: Meta-Fictional Implications of Perspective in the Novels of Harry Crews
(Under the Direction of DR. HUGH RUPPERSBURG)

This paper addresses several novels by the Georgia-born writer Harry Crews. *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, *A Feast of Snakes*, and *Body* each involve comparable female characters and potentially anti-feminist commentaries. Whether the author intends to convey anti-feminist messages or merely to depict faithfully the attitudes of the male, "grit" inhabitants of southern Georgia and northern Florida remains unsettled in critical accounts. Previous criticism also fails to explore a connection between women and another class of characters, Crews's freaks. Crews has said, "freaks are human beings who happen to be 'enterable,'" that is, their physical appearance leads to revelations of character and of human nature in general. This paper demonstrates the ways in which the novelist accesses character through physical appearance, and it traces the problems that arise from this approach. Moreover, it pursues the relationship of character and perspective to Crew's attitudes toward the genre of the novel itself. Perspective—the vantage points of narrators, characters, the novelist, and the readers—informs not only the political messages of Crews's fiction, it also sheds light on the ideological underpinnings of the novel. Crews asks whether a form that claims to encompass not only the socioeconomic, symbolic, and historical forces behind a narrative, but also the private psychologies of the individuals involved, is really well-suited to such endeavors, or whether the novel does not have certain limitations for which its practitioners must account. The paper charts Crews's struggle to reconcile his characters' humanness with their status as fictional beings.

INDEX WORDS: Harry Crews, Southern Literature, Novel Studies, Feminism, Meta-Fiction

IMAGING CHARACTER: META-FICTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERSPECTIVE IN THE NOVELS OF HARRY CREWS

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In a 1974 interview, Crews elaborates on a question often posed, albeit in a variety of forms, by critics of his writing: “Do the freaks in your work reflect your own view of yourself? You have a withered leg” (Watson 57). To this Crews replies, “if you’re a midget, all the facades that people maintain in their lives to keep people from knowing who they are and what they’re like and what they’re doing, don’t work for you. When a midget walks into a place to get on a stool to get a hamburger, he’s got ten problems to solve with people looking at him . . . freaks are human beings who happen to be ‘enterable.’ They are human beings who offer a kind of avenue for entrance” (57-58). In this conception, physical deformity is a gateway to understanding character. Crews is careful to point out, however, that not all deformed or disfigured individuals are alike merely by virtue of their so-called freakishness. Of the first three midgets in his novels, Crews says, “They’re not even remotely alike . . . They’re very different human beings with different preoccupations” (58). More importantly, Crews does not restrict freakishness to the deformed. In another interview, given in 1972, he says, “if there are freaks in my novels . . . it is only that these people have conditions which are more apparent and more immediate than the people around them. But I am convinced that you and I, all of us, are caught in the same kind of inexplicable, almost blind terror, except that ours is not so apparent” (Foata 30-31). For the novelist then, traditionally literature’s chief inquirer into character, the freak is an ideal type. It is the freak who occupies the threshold of the mystery of human nature, who seems to evidence that mystery in his short stature, in his elephantiasis of the foot, or in his extreme obesity, to

name just a few of the physical abnormalities that occur in Crews's early novels. The freak is both an individual, like anyone else, as well as an emblem of humankind's condition, which is a kind of inscrutability, "an almost blind terror." Paraphrasing the late photographer of extraordinary-looking people Diane Arbus, Crews asserts, "we all eventually come to our traumas in life, nobody escapes this. A freak is born with his trauma" (Watson 57).

Crews's allusion to Arbus is revealing. Critics have noted the exceptionally visual, almost cinematic qualities of his writing. As Richard Rankin Russell puts it, "What characterizes the typical Crews novel is its concision, its distillation of the essences of life into the essences of fiction: plot, character, dialogue, and storytelling, the last of which is driven by a love of concrete prose" (33). Far from merely deploying vivid imagery to paint a scene, to depict the material landscapes of southern Georgia and northern Florida, Crews applies his perceptive eye and his descriptive hand to the representation of characters. These physical descriptions, in turn, become tools of characterization, reflective of the figures' psychological topography as well as their roles in the texts' underlying symbolic narratives. The paradigm of the freak is extended to other characters. When readers first meet John Kaimon, for instance, the protagonist of *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, they learn he has been sleeping on the beach atop a beer can, and that his hair is "shoulder length and curling and black. But the thick beard which seemed to start below his eyes was red" (22). Kaimon's haggard profile immediately suggests his status as a wanderer who is also figuratively adrift.

Yet, certain characters receive far more visual attention than others in Crews's work. In addition to freaks, readers have noted the regularity with which women become the objects of sustained looks from Crews's narrators. Whereas major male characters receive partially detailed

physical descriptions, or are assigned a few significant physical attributes, major and minor female characters as well as freaks are habitually described to the point of fetishization, an observation that corresponds to the prevalence of spectacle—freak shows and beauty pageants—in Crews's fiction. The opening passage of *A Feast of Snakes*, in which the third-person narrator's description and Joe Lon Mackey's eyes linger over the body of the cheerleader Candy Sweet, is one example. If the fascination of the novelist with the freak can be attributed to the freak's standing as an ideal character type and emblem of the human condition, can the same be said for the novelist's fascination with the female body? Are women "enterable" in the sense that their superficial traits easily lead to revelations of character, or do they pose a serious hazard for Crews in his attempts to access character through physical description?

Interpreters have consistently raised the issue of sexism with respect to Crews's treatment of women. In an article first published in 1998, Elise S. Lake presents a summary she calls "The Critics on Crews's Women" (80). She reports that of the two critics who "examine Crews's female characters in greater depth . . . [both] find sexism in the novels, but identify different sources for it" (81). While one considers the author himself a sexist, the other "locates sexism in the kinds of men Crews portrays" (81). Lake herself agrees, "women *are* objectified as objects of desire, frustration, and occasionally dread," but she argues, "Such talk fits Crews's males, who often use disparaging terms to refer to people different from themselves . . . Intolerance is common in Crews's lower-class characters. Their conversation reflects . . . their culture" (91). Lake also points out that "Crews can show empathy in describing women's relationships with their own bodies," as he does with the character Earline in the novel *Body* (91). Her essay ends with a section entitled "Mixed Messages" (92), and her resolution is uneasy: "For *most* Crews

characters," she writes, "hopes are unrealized . . . Success is illusory, and self-determination is elusive for both men and women" (93). Crews "may mean to demonstrate that success itself is a delusion—for all people" (87). Nicholas Spencer, however, writing in 2001, finds that misogyny still lurks behind at least one instance of success in the novels. He argues that John Kaimon of *Karate* "overcome[s] his crisis of subjectivity by rejecting the karate commune and its body fetish" (139), but, "the fact that it is Kaimon who realizes the flaws of the . . . commune and passes what he has learned on to Gaye Nell Odell [the novel's chief female character] reflects a misogynistic distinction between active males and passive females" (220). Whether or not Kaimon does in fact successfully negotiate a crisis of subjectivity, or whether any interpersonal transmission of knowledge occurs at the end of *Karate*, the charge of sexism stands. Does the paradigm of the freak break down when applied to female bodies? If, as Crews says, "We are all victims of our angle of vision" (Foata 33), what limitations attend the perspective of the highly visual novelist, in which spectatorship and authorship merge?

This paper will explore such issues of character and perspective by way of three novels written at different points in Crews's career. *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971) introduces Crews's visual style, his attention to the corporeal as it is defined against the immaterial and the abstract, as well as his self-reflexive and meta-fictional approach to the genre of the novel. In *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), Crews's vision takes a darker turn, even as it moves closer to home. The small town of Mystic, Georgia, only one county distant from Crews's native Bacon County, becomes the site of a meditation on the political resonances of place. Again, the novel itself—not to mention novel writing and novel reading—comes under scrutiny. Crews asks whether a form that claims to encompass not only the socioeconomic, symbolic, and historical forces behind a

particular narrative, but also the private psychologies of the individuals involved, is really well-suited to such endeavors, or whether the novel itself has certain ideological underpinnings and blind spots that its practitioners must account for. Crews's skepticism has a post-colonial flavor. Finally, in *Body* (1990), the mature novelist extends his inquiries about character and genre into questions of human nature: when does it reveal itself? and what is its tenor? If Crews's vision is ultimately bleak, it nevertheless reflects a man in earnest, committed to his craft, and inclined to identify with his creations rather than merely ridiculing them. If his vision is comic in its immoderate language, pervasive violence, and florid sexuality, it also has its tragic side—equally incisive, but quieter in its studies of hardship, human character, and the nuances of good and evil.

CHAPTER 2
OBJECTIVE VISION AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN *KARATE IS A THING OF THE SPIRIT*

Subjectivity, in the first two chapters of *Karate*, is constituted chiefly by perception rather than thought. Crews's persistent notation of instances of perception, which continues throughout the book, begins in these mirrored passages, the first of which centers upon Gaye Nell Odell, the second upon John Kaimon. In the first chapter, a highly observant third-person narrator relates Gaye Nell's progress along a stretch of beach "just south of Ft. Lauderdale" (13). Preceding any description of this marginal terrain, however, is an instance of auditory perception attributed to Gaye Nell: "At regular intervals the sound—hoarse, abrupt—came to her over the sand dunes. It was the only sound anywhere" (13). The sound's ambiguity, as well as its omnipresence, accentuates the act of perception itself, which has as yet failed to resolve the phenomenon. The narrator transitions to a body-centric description of others on the beach—"retirees and their wives burnt to the color of cork, paunched, sunvisored, greased with Coppertone and Johnson's Baby Oil" (13)—and calls attention to their eyes: "their pinched leathery faces squinted in her direction, their eyes rolling to follow her, not believing her even though they saw her nearly every morning and knew who she was" (13). As the auditory perception before it did not yield an identifiable sound, so the retirees' ocular perception does not produce a comprehensible mental concept of its object. This reiterated disconnection, in addition to emphasizing the perceptive act by virtue of its conspicuous failure, also begs the question of why this environment, so lucidly rendered, is not quite assimilable by those who inhabit it. The

first chapter establishes a polarity between the perceivable external world and private vision, with its attendant states of comprehension or belief.

When Gaye Nell comes across a man standing beside the entrance to a “meatrack” (15), a small abode dug into the sand, her perception seems to shy away, though, again, the narrator produces a graphic image of the figure. The man “looked like an animated anatomy chart. His greased, rippling body was shimmering in the sun . . . But she hardly noticed . . . She had no peripheral vision, no peripheral feeling” (15). Upon seeing the karate master, Belt, in whose exercises she is about to participate, Gaye Nell excludes all other phenomena. Her fixation upon the karate scene corresponds to a heightened awareness of her own subjectivity, her own corporeality, and “She felt her body ache for contact” (15). The act of looking—Gaye Nell’s private vision—is invoked repeatedly in this moment. “She could see the master . . . She watched with a love that was beyond pride . . . She could see them all now . . . nine students in a single row before the master” (15). Her vision conditions her emotions, and the language of perception encompasses her feelings. The narrator remarks, “[Belt] was her heart’s focus now” (15). Not only does the narrator’s perceptual notation suggest the great importance of karate for Gaye Nell, but it also reveals the extent to which her vision and her selfhood, her emotional or psychological make-up, merge.

The following chapter also begins with an instance of perception and is essentially a recapitulation and development of its predecessor from a different perspective. John Kaimon “opened his eyes, pulled the blanket away from his face and looked up through the chalky limbs of an Australian pine” (21). Specific information about the landscape—the species of tree on the beach—mingles with a registration of perceptual actions. In this case, however, the actions

correspond even more closely to Kaimon's emergence as a fictional subject. It is as though he had not existed prior to his awakening on the sand; indeed, in literal terms, he had not. His arousal and his first appearance in the text are simultaneous. This effect of spontaneous animation is reinforced by Kaimon's status as protagonist, the character to which the limited narrator has the greatest psychological access. Kaimon's mental efforts to resolve his perceptual quandaries mingle with his perceptions themselves so that the disconnection between impression and comprehension is even more apparent than in the previous chapter. Kaimon feels the ground beneath him shake, "Then he realized it was not the ground but some awful interminable noise that was shaking his head" (21). When the narration enters the free indirect mode, Kaimon's thoughts and perceptions blend with increasingly fluidity. In a single sentence, Kaimon sees, "A ship" and thinks "—too big to be real" (21). Yet, the narrative continually withdraws from his thoughts and returns to perceptual action. Kaimon "pressed his knuckles into his eyes, rubbed, and blinked. He then turned—deliberately, slowly—and looked down the beach . . . He raced into the ocean and splashed water over his face. This time when he looked, he saw that there were people fighting all over the jetties . . . That's when he turned and saw the man in the lifeguard tower . . . his eyes did not seem to have any lids" (22). The narrator's rehearsal of Kaimon's perceptual actions attests to the strangeness of the scene and the surprise with which he witnesses it; it also helps to define his character as one who will have to wrestle with what he sees and what he believes. If, as Gaye Nell illustrates, vision and subjectivity in the novel are linked, then Kaimon's narrative of self-determination or identity will coincide with a quest for a true vision, a reliable mode of perception. This quest, in turn, mirrors that of the visual novelist attuned to matters of appearance and character. Reading Kaimon as a novelist figure thus informs Crews's approach to character.

If this connection seems at first somewhat tenuous, the fact that Kaimon wears a jersey emblazoned with the face of William Faulkner lends it more credibility. Faulkner comes to serve as a novelist role model with an unusual or perverse vision, but he is also a reminder of home and a moral signpost. This is the mark Kaimon bears, and toward which he expresses conflicting attitudes. On one hand, Kaimon looks to Faulkner in his moment of greatest despair. Having damaged both of his hands in a brutal karate exercise, and having recently been violated by the homosexual pair George and Marvin, Kaimon looks at his jersey and wishes it "were spread out on the wall so he could see the whole face. Mainly he wishes he could see both eyes. Something to stare into. God, is he lonely . . . He stares at the Jersey and wishes for Faulkner's eyes" (58). Kaimon seeks a human face with which to communicate, but he also desires a new vision. He "wishes" for Faulkner's eyes as though he would substitute them for his own. Then he speaks—"Dear Faulkner" (58)—and begins the novelistic act of composing a letter aloud, of recounting his ordeals in the first person. The exchange of glances, in which Faulkner seems to confer some of his compositional power, and the desire for perspective correspond with the moment of creation. Spectatorship converges with authorship. The relationship between looking and writing, implicit in the conspicuous narration of perception, is actualized by Kaimon's letter. By looking at Faulkner, he is able to see himself as a character in a story, and in so doing, he is able to write himself, to participate in his own identity formation. That *Karate*'s narration switches to the first person point of view, as though Crews were stepping aside and allowing Kaimon to speak for himself, reflects the symbolic import of the moment.

Kaimon, however, also voices deep misgivings about his idol, which, considering the extent to which he associates himself with Faulkner, are in large part responsible for his identity

crisis. Inquiring about his shirt, Gaye Nell cannot understand why Kaimon wears it if he has never read any of Faulkner's work. Kaimon responds, "I'm from Oxford myself, you see" (80). Still, Gaye Nell misses his point. "We weren't talking about where Faulkner's from," she says. "We were talking about why you had his face on your shirt" (80). Of course, the fact that Kaimon comes from Faulkner's hometown is precisely the reason he wears a Faulkner shirt. The famous author and the place are identified with one another, and to be from Oxford means, to Kaimon at least, to share something with Faulkner. Kaimon explains, "I come from Oxford, Mississippi, so I keep the face of Faulkner around. If I was a Catholic, I'd wear a Saint Christopher medal" (80). Faulkner symbolizes Oxford, but he also represents a facet of Kaimon's identity, like a religious emblem. The conversation suggests the extent to which one's place of origin influences one's identity—a common theme in Crews's writing—but it also demonstrates the power of the visual sign to construct character. Kaimon, as a novelist figure, also believes in this paradigm. Though he has never read Faulkner's books, his conviction that Faulkner somehow impacts his identity, that he almost has a duty to carry an image of the author, is evidenced by his research into Faulkner's life and critical reception. As he says to Belt, "I've gone to some trouble to find these things out" (142). Unfortunately, Kaimon is uncomfortable with what he has discovered. "An editor from one of the best newspapers in the state of Mississippi said Faulkner was from the privy school of literature," Kaimon recounts (142). "And you don't expect to find honey in a privy. You expect to find shit. And besides, all of his stuff is full of freaks" (142). Interpreting Faulkner as an emblem of himself, Kaimon implies that the author's "perverted degenerate" (141) nature somehow reflects similar traits in his own character. The pejorative description also has a pronounced resemblance to the mixed reception

of Crews's novels; his first three, which immediately precede *Karate*, have especially large casts of freakish characters. The trio of novelists, Crews, Kaimon, and Faulkner, are self-consciously aligned.

During the climax of the novel, the degeneration of the Fourth of July celebration on the beach into complete chaos, Faulkner remains someone to whom Kaimon looks for a moral benchmark and whom he desires to emulate. After the beauty pageant, when Gaye Nell's physique and powerful sexuality drive him to make love to her violently, he reflects that he has probably let Faulkner down and compromised his own ideals. "He was just like they were" (190), he remarks, referring to the bloodthirsty crowd that had been whipped into an erotically charged frenzy by the pageant. Kaimon "knew now that it was the certainty that he was different from other people that had driven him out of Mississippi . . . It was why he had put Faulkner on his back and worn him like a talisman. Faulkner was not like the rest" (190). Though disturbed by reports of the author's perversion, even, in a moment of self-loathing, identifying himself with it, Kaimon now reveals that he had always seen everyone else as depraved and only himself and Faulkner as normal. But Kaimon's submission to the destructive energy of the crowd causes him to question his belief in Faulkner. "Faulkner was not like the rest," he thinks, "Or was he? God, what an ultimate irony if he was. Would Faulkner have fucked her?. . . it flashed upon him what *he* had done. He had blindly raped the thing that had driven the crowd crazy" (190-191). Kaimon's moral failure is described as a failure of perception, as blindness. It is a blindness that extends to his failure to read Gaye Nell's motivations or to resolve the true character of Faulkner, to determine whether or not the author was "like the rest." Gaye Nell had consented not out of desire for Kaimon, but with the hope that he could "knock" his baby out of her (188) and

terminate her pregnancy. Kaimon's doubting of Faulkner leads to a complete overturning of the author's revered status and of the value of believing in anything immaterial at all. Back at the karate motel, Kaimon looks at his jersey, but Faulkner's gaze seems both diminished and blankly material. His "narrow aluminum gaze fell upon John Kaimon," and Kaimon realizes, "A chicken truck could kill Faulkner . . . and it could kill Belt, too" (209). His acknowledgement of the fallibility of his idols derives from his new sense of their corporeality, their mortality. He then "thought about Christ and the twenty cents' worth of nails it would take to pin Him bleeding and screaming to the cross. Nothing but belief could ever get him down again" (209). Kaimon erects a dichotomy between the material world and the immaterial, or spiritual, world of belief. Whereas he had previously described himself as "the world's champion believer" (50) and had wandered the country seeking different lifestyles and philosophies he could adhere to, he is now thrown back upon himself and forced to ask, "What does a believer do when there is nothing left to believe?" (208). The question recalls Crews's epigraph to *The Gospel Singer*: "Men to whom God is dead worship each other" (6), and *Karate*'s resolution adheres to this logic. Kaimon must turn to a fellow human being, physical and imperfect. For the novelist, this is a gesture that entails dispensing with literary archetypes in favor of more lifelike characters. As Crews says, "I am scared to death of the word 'symbol' . . . Everything is a symbol as it becomes involved in any narrative, any sequence of events where human beings are involved and things become infused with meaning larger than themselves . . . how we become what we are, and how we deal with what we have become, and how everybody around us deals with whatever we become. That's what I'm interested in" (Foata 30). After renouncing several causes in which he can no longer believe, Kaimon addresses Gaye Nell, "I believe in you . . . And I believe you can have

my baby" (*Karate* 210). When the couple departs, Kaimon leaves his Faulkner jersey hanging from a nail (211).

The lesson Kaimon learns in the wake of the pageant, his adoption of physical truth and material vision, is actually a variation on a lesson he learns earlier, in the wake of a parallel incident. A comparison of these episodes sheds light on the potentially misogynistic conclusion of the novel. Again, his Faulkner jersey appears as if to reprimand Kaimon for allowing desire to obscure his vision. He has been watching two exotic dancers in the Iron Horse club, where, as critic Nicholas Spencer puts it, "gender codes are self-consciously performed, inverted, amalgamated, and seemingly subverted" (142). After the distressing experience of seeing a male cross-dresser reveal himself in the restroom, Kaimon is careful to inquire whether the two dancers on stage are in fact female. When his host and fellow karate practitioner provides an equivocal affirmation, Kaimon allows himself to believe, "They were real girls. I mean *real* girls" (*Karate* 72). Then his sexual desire takes over. Having just broken his hands during the first of Gaye Nell's training exercises, Kaimon feels the need to reestablish his masculine self-image, which for him entails "get[ting] some girl down on her back and fuck[ing] till I went deaf, dumb and blind" (73). Kaimon's perception of the dancers, in which he has total confidence—"Real girl work. I hadn't watched but for a minute or two before I knew for sure what I was watching" (73)—becomes perhaps the novel's foremost example of a mistaken impression. When he enters the apparently female dancers' dressing room, he is met by Faulkner's "cold aluminum eyes," and he realizes immediately "it was a different ball game" (76). The dancers are George and Marvin, and they have their way with Kaimon who has now been emasculated both by a woman and by the homosexual pair. Throughout the novel,

Faulkner's face on the shirt, applied with aluminum paint, evokes a piercing, empirical vision. His appearance in the depths of a space dedicated to desire, where visual illusion is the norm, where gay characters demonstrate and unmask "the gendered performativity of the body" (Spencer 143), suggests the need for a more rigorous perception in this arena. As Spencer writes, Crews is well aware of the social codes that determine one's perceptions of the body, but Faulkner's unspoken rebuke signals more than merely "the inseparability of language [social codes] and the body" (143). As a novelist, Faulkner is not associated with the social language that determines Kaimon's naive desire for the dancers but, rather, with the visual language of verifiable, physical truth that should have prevented his perceptual error. If George and Marvin's performance reveals the arbitrariness of sexual codes, Faulkner seems to represent a more objective conception of gender difference. It is sexualized vision, in *Karate*, that inhibits the observer or novelist from exploring character beyond the superficial level of gender. Recognition of gender difference on the other hand, requires an objective eye, and far from yielding only essentialized characters, it opens the door to round, fully individualized representations.

This is the point Elise S. Lake makes, summarizing Crews's position in his essay "The Unfeminine Mystique." "Personal relationships," she writes, "achieve closeness through the exchange of intimacies, the recognition of individual differences, the negotiation of identities. When we eliminate particularism, relationships—including those between the sexes—become stilted, sterile" (82). The novel sets up a contrast between two rationales for prohibiting sexualized vision. According to the rules of the karate commune, both the homosexual and heterosexual gaze are disallowed "in favor," as Spencer phrases it, "of the iteration of the norms of a self-absorbed spiritualized inwardness" (138). Thus, Gaye Nell tests the initiates by

exposing them to her figure and physically punishing them if they express the slightest arousal. From the novelist's perspective, articulated by the appearance of Faulkner, sexualized gaze is prohibited because it leads to grave miscalculations about others and false views of the world, and it defeats the paradigm of reading character through the body. What Kaimon perceives when he watches Gaye Nell at the pageant—"It was pussy and violence . . . an unimaginable fuck in the same black swimming suit with certain death and mutilation" (183)—is an utterly skewed idea of femininity influenced by the masochistic fantasy of the crowd, and is in no way a picture of an individual. That Crews couples this perception to Kaimon's own sense of failure, to the senseless patriotism of some during the years of the Vietnam War, and to the crowd's hysterical reaction to the death of the fallen pilot indicates just how fallacious and dangerous he considers that sort of vision.

After the pageant, Kaimon begins to re-envision Gaye Nell in much the same way he had reassessed his conception of Faulkner. His ideas of both depend upon his newly acquired sense of the fragility of their bodies, but with Gaye Nell, fragility is linked to maternity, rather than death. Whereas during the pageant he had seen his unborn child, and by extension himself, as imminently threatened—"He could not shake from his mind," while looking at her stomach, "the image of himself the size of a dime hanging for his life inside there in the wet and dangerous lining of her" (186)—he now sees her eyes as "defenseless" (208) and her mouth as "vulnerable" (209), and he kisses her knuckles, formerly the source of her lethal aura. Kaimon's fantastic sexualized ideal of her, in which he had regarded her posterior "as though he looked upon the face of God" (187), is replaced by a more human notion that can accommodate Gaye Nell's motives and anxieties. As Faulkner had proven fallible, so Gaye Nell is shown to have her share

of troubles. She, too, has been a victim of the karate master's denial of sexual difference. Her passionless violation of Kaimon, executed as a routine training exercise according to Belt's system, is after all the reason for her current state. Like Kaimon, she failed to perceive the body with an objective eye, and her own body defeated her spiritualized understanding of the sexual act. Crews's resolution finds both male and female characters ready to see one another, and themselves, in a more objective and individualized light.

CHAPTER 3
THE CRITIQUE OF IRONY IN *A FEAST OF SNAKES*

Like *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, *A Feast of Snakes* is concerned with the connections between spectatorship and authorship, or self-authorship. Whereas the enterprise of reading character in *Karate*, however, is chiefly visual or material, in *A Feast of Snakes*, this visual enterprise is subsumed by larger metaphors of literacy and textuality. Joe Lon Mackey, like John Kaimon, suffers from a frequently sexualized vision, but his inability to decipher the written word is the more symbolically freighted of his dilemmas, not only because it includes his helplessness to interpret linguistic or social coding of the body, but also because it places him in pointed contrast to the novel's readers as well as the novelist himself. His sexualized vision is merely one symptom of his general linguistic deficiency, and his illiteracy is responsible for the ironic dynamics of *A Feast of Snakes*.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye outlines a sweeping, meta-generic history of Western narrative founded upon a five-part taxonomy of literary heroes, or protagonists. By this scheme, *A Feast of Snakes* would seem to fall into the final category, which Frye calls the "ironic mode." As an ironic hero, Joe Lon is patently "inferior in power . . . to ourselves [the readers], so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity . . . This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom." (123). Of course, Joe Lon's bondage and frustration far exceeds his inability to read, but it is this incapacity that is the principal factor preventing his escape from Mystic, Georgia and which produces the book's structural irony, for

the novel's readers can only confront Joe Lon, can only read him, as a textual entity. Readers look down on Joe Lon's circumscribed world in a very literal way, as upon the pages of a book, and their lofty ironic vision is, superficially, instated as superior. Yet, in accordance with Frye's subsequent qualification, "Once we have learned to distinguish the modes . . . we must then learn to recombine them" (125), the novel ultimately questions its own ironic perspective, and Joe Lon, despite his monstrousness, comes to resemble a person like us—at least in the existential sense to which Crews refers when he speaks of the "almost blind terror" of the human condition. The novel reveals that ironic vision is as socially and politically freighted as sexualized vision and equally as fallible. The final irony of the novel is its "most frustrating answer" (Edwards 76) concerning the matter of Joe Lon's motivations and character, that even we privileged readers, as well as the novelist himself, "do not and cannot know" (76) whether or not Joe Lon is responsible for his actions. An obscure "indeterminacy" frustrates readers' empirical efforts to read Joe Lon's character (76) and functions as a critique of the ironic mode, which, because it "tends toward myth" (Frye 129), does not do justice to the real mystery of human nature behind the literary character.

Frye's five-part progression from myth to irony and back to myth is too broad, however, to identify *A Feast of Snakes*' immediate antecedents in the history of American literature, which further inform the novel's ironic vision. The critic Tim Edwards identifies a more specific category of ironic literature to which he argues *A Feast of Snakes* belongs. This is the "rich vein of naturalism that has shaped social criticism in American fiction since the 1890s" (64). Even more specifically, Edwards refers to three phases in the development of naturalism as delineated by literary historian Donald Pizer. The first, in the 1890s, responded to the displacement of

agrarianism by urbanism and industrialism. Naturalism of the 1930s "stemmed from the economic strains of the Great Depression and the Marxist intellectual currents of the period" (66). Finally, the most recent variety was born of the "sense of chaos and despair" (66) of the postwar period and extended into the 1970s. The "extermination camps, the atom bomb, the cold war in Europe and the hot war in Korea, the McCarthy witch hunts " (qtd. 66)—many of the forces that shaped the postmodern vision of modernity also shaped this new naturalism. As Edwards argues, the "continuing threat of nuclear devastation, economic recession, and the violence and poverty of the cities [had] created a new sense of 'hard times' in America" (qtd. 66-67). He then indicates the general critical awareness that Crews's novel depicts a society in transition from "agricultural to industrial values and from subsistence to individual achievement" (67), which recalls naturalism's first phase. In fact, both the transition away from a traditional economy—a change that came late to southern Georgia—as well as the postwar fears and turmoil cited above are represented in *A Feast of Snakes* as an incursion, and both inflect the novel's naturalistic narrative. Hordes of tourists come from as far as Texas and Canada to participate in the rattlesnake hunt. Their ranks include representatives of the large-scale social transformations taking place across the rest of the country, in particular members of the youth counterculture whose heyday was already waning by the time of the novel's publication in 1976 and whom Crews designates as "young dopers" or "longhairs" (*Snakes* 52-53), in keeping with the attitudes of the citizens of Mystic. As Edwards points out, several of Crews's characters are also absorbed in the world of entertainment television and news broadcasts (67), another means by which the outside world reaches the small town. These cultural markers both historicize the novel and modulate Frye's taxonomy. The naturalistic novelist and the readers are well aware of

the forces at work in the characters' lives, though the characters themselves have little inkling of their own positions in the larger historical narrative.

Other hallmarks of naturalism contribute to the ironic distance of the readers. Edwards calls attention to the "obsession with competition" in the novel (69). Far from merely finding serving as sport or recreation, competition in Crews's work stands in for Herbert Spencer's "infamous catchphrase, 'survival of the fittest'" (69). Not only does competition rise to levels of excruciating violence—as when Joe Lon and Willard Miller terrorize the helpless Poncy on the dance floor, or when Big Joe holds a pit bull fight in his backyard—it is also rendered in the animalistic imagery typical of the genre. The extent of bestialization in *A Feast of Snakes* is total. Edwards contends, "Crews's novel does not really deconstruct the traditional binary opposition of man/beast; instead it shows us that there is no difference between the human and the brute" (68). From animalistic descriptions of even minor characters' physiques—Hard Candy is "slick . . . ready to spring—to *strike*" (*Snakes* 3); Willard Miller "had a direct lidless stare and tiny ears . . . his round blunt head did not so much sit on his huge neck as it seemed buried in it" (19)—to the all-out deployment of phallic imagery, the novel exhaustively emphasizes the place of human beings in the Darwinian jungle.

The jungle, however, is localized. Though the narrative never leaves the geographical vicinity of Mystic, it is clear that any competition that transpires in more cosmopolitan locales features drastically different rules, and that the rule changes correspond to the border between socioeconomic classes. Joe Lon and Willard's exchange about Shep, the University of Georgia student whom Berenice brings home from Athens, shows how deep the class divide runs and how foreign the competitions of the literate seem to those on the other side. Joe Lon asks, "'You

meet the fag debate player?' . . . Willard smiled and sucked his teeth. 'Yeah . . . I met him. Sweet, ain't he? Looks like a dirt track specialist to me'" (73). When Joe Lon wonders, "How the Hell you play debate anyhow?" (73), Willard invents a game on the spot. "These two guys wear little white slippers" he claims, "And they throw the rubber rings to each other and try to catch the rubber ring in their mouth" (74). Willard and Joe Lon respond to the unknown activity of debate by attempting to recast it as a model of competition they do understand, the physical and sexual competition that predominates in Mystic. They denigrate Shep by labeling him with a taboo of their own patriarchal society: homosexuality. In applying their sexualized gaze to a fellow male, they reduce Shep to an object-label, just as the novel's women are objectified in their eyes. Their vision belies the rigidity of their thinking, but it also illustrates the codification of their culture, of which their thinking is a product, and the codification of culture generally. By emphasizing the border between two socioeconomic groups, Crews makes a basic point about cultural relativism and marginality versus centrality, issues he explores in greater depth in *Body*. While Willard and Joe Lon use codes of physical fitness to brand Shep a homosexual—and therefore as aberrant, feminine, and inferior—Shep and Dr. Sweet refer to the country around Mystic as "the provinces" (134), a patronizing name that really means "boondocks," backwater," or "the middle of nowhere."

Crews's deliberately extravagant playfulness with cultural relativism—his characters are all exaggerated representatives of their types: the redneck, the college boy, the country doctor—also places a significant amount of pressure upon the border itself. In this narrative of social criticism and naturalistic inquiry, literacy is the variable which, against a background of other factors, is isolated for consideration. Literacy, and not athletic prowess, is the passport required

to leave Mystic. That Joe Lon must suffer the indignities of having to "deal nigger whiskey" (*Snakes* 27), that he has never left his hometown like Berenice, is a direct result of his illiteracy. Berenice, too, has excellent athletic skills—baton twirling—but it is her academic skills, presumably encouraged by her learned father, the doctor, that enable her to leave. Joe Lon apparently does not lack the intelligence to acquire proficiency in reading, but within the confines of Mystic, he has had little reason to apply his mind to the problem. That such a skill as reading, associated with physically inferior and otherwise feminized men in the text, could prevent him from playing football in college is beyond comprehension for him. In a world in which the "Boss Snake" of the football team commands respect even from the more knowledgeable high school teachers, reading, in and for itself, is irrelevant. Joe Lon would have been wasting his mental resources to learn it, for to learn to read would have taken time away from memorizing the team playbook. Further, Joe Lon's entrepreneurial spirit is openly established in the text, but his endeavors become entrapments tying him to Mystic. Having fallen into his father's duties of managing the liquor store as well as the annual rattlesnake roundup, Joe Lon sees a moneymaking opportunity and buys a plot of land on which tourists can pay to park their campers. Joe Lon also marries a woman who by all others' accounts is "some little lady" (110). It is only that he is unhappy with the underlying situation, his inability to do what he truly loves, and for this reason, even his small successes contribute to his stifling rage and despair. The dramatic consequences of Joe Lon's illiteracy provoke the readers to reflect upon their own literacy. The ability to read becomes a yardstick for class, and it stands at the dividing line between difference and identification in the novel.

To read Joe Lon's character by his status, to read him, that is, as a product of forces only the ironic eye can see, ultimately proves difficult. Crews invites this mode of reading by emphasizing the consequences of Joe Lon's illiteracy, by deploying hyperbolic serpentine and phallic imagery, and by incorporating national social and economic changes into the narrative, and he allows these registers of meaning to inform the novel. Its gruesome climax, however, poses a direct challenge to these ironic avenues of interpretation. Joe Lon opens fire with his shotgun, and readers are left to ponder his motivations and whether the forces of history, society, illiteracy, and the text's latent symbolic narratives are enough to explain what has just happened. Irony presupposes the intelligence of the readers, and Frye's structuralist theories, as well as naturalism's emphasis on determining forces, do open the text to broader modes of explication. But does ironic vision, which would understand Joe Lon as a product of the historical and narrative machinery and as an emblem of the lower class, err in the way that sexualized vision errs, by turning human complexity into an homogenous textual entity?

Pursuing *A Feast of Snakes*' ironic interpretive possibilities sheds light on this error and illustrates the way the novel consistently undermines its own insistence upon the difference between readers and characters. Imagery of the serpent and the phallus recalls Frye's assertion that "Ironic literature begins with realism and tends toward myth" (129). Undoubtedly, two of the myths that are "displaced" in *A Feast of Snakes* are the Christian myth of the Fall and the Freudian myth of the family romance. If displacement is defined as the technical problem of making myth seem plausible (127), then what better way to realize mythical content than to create a plot that revolves around a traditional snake festival and a fractured, dysfunctional family? Other sources of displaced mythical content might include the figure of the romantic

(Chivalric) hero, which Joe Lon, Buddy Matlow, and Big Joe Mackey each subvert, though their anti-heroism is perhaps subordinate to their role in the Freudian drama.

On the myth of the Fall, Edwards demonstrates how the snake carries a more sophisticated metaphorical burden than as a mere representative of gendered (masculine *and* feminine) evil, or even of national evil (that the book was published on the bicentennial may bear on this suggestion). The snake, as that "mysterious indeterminacy" (75) behind Joe Lon's downfall, as "something slippery, shadowy, unnamable, something that violates the often scientific examination of causality typical of so many naturalistic narratives" (75)—complicates the very definition of naturalism, and by extension the ironic distance, the looking down upon, supposed by Frye's paradigm. No linear causal chain or confluence of external, non-subjective forces combine to drive Joe Lon to mass murder. The reader cannot, Edwards argues, empirically determine exactly what led to his destruction (76). This is partially because Joe Lon himself does not understand his malaise. He knows only that something is gravely wrong and "that things would not be different tomorrow" (*Snakes* 170). Because Crews renders Joe Lon's subjectivity through free indirect discourse, rather than from an omniscient perspective, readers' knowledge of his crisis is restricted—and more intimate. The readers necessarily identify with Joe Lon's confusion. As critic Dorrit Cohn argues of that narrative technique, "narrative language appears . . . as a kind of mask, from behind which sounds the voice of a figural mind . . . By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue [free indirect discourse] casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization" (495). Cohn notes both a definitive voice in free indirect discourse and a shadowy quality that "bears the stamp of characteristical limitations and distortions" (495).

Readers know what the character knows and see the world as the character sees it, but it is a world necessarily restricted and distorted. Joe Lon cannot explain his increasing rage and despair, and Crews's novel asserts that there are certain truths "we do not and cannot know" (Edwards 76). Readers are equally frustrated by his inability to get to the root of his dilemma, and they, too, see that family problems, illiteracy, and all the other factors do not in themselves explain what he ultimately does. As Joe Lon puts it, one could "go nuts trying to pretend things would someday be different" (*Snakes* 170), and most probably would try to pretend before beginning to blast a shotgun. But, that Crews wants his readers to identify with a killer (also an abusive spouse, alcoholic, and adulterer) begins to illustrate Frye's critique of his categories and move the novel back toward the fourth mode, which Frye calls "low mimetic." "If superior neither to other men nor to his environment," he writes, "the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity . . . This gives us the hero of the *low mimetic* mode, of most comedy and realistic fiction" (123). The classical narrative technique of nineteenth century realism, free indirect discourse, becomes in Crews's hands both a means of constructing an ironic, symbolic narrative of slippery serpentine evil, and a way to critique ironic distance itself by forcing a traditionally realist identification. One has only to compare Flannery O'Connor's attitude toward Hazel Motes—a pure ironic treatment—to see that what Crews is up to is something more complex. In an existential sense, Joe Lon Mackey is a person like us.

The snake as a phallic image also performs complicated symbolic work. Not only is Buddy Matlow literally castrated while wearing a condom designed to look like a snake, but the novel is also obsessed with other, more subtle threats of emasculation. Matlow's amputated leg, the result of a wound in Vietnam, serves as a visible reminder for the other male characters that

their physical powers, the source of their authority in Mystic, are not invulnerable. Matlow himself resorts to the illegal detainment and rape of innocent women to compensate for his lost glory. He, too, was a champion football player, but his past, following his physical diminishment by what he conceives of as a grotesque and unfair accident—"hadn't he gone straight to Veet Nam, stepped on a pungy stick that had been dipped in Veet Nam Ease shit" (*Snakes* 15)—now only haunts him and fuels his unconscionable behavior. Big Joe apparently has leg trouble. He asks Joe Lon to hurry to bring him a bottle of whiskey because, he says, "son, my old legs is a hurtin" (18)—this as, it is later revealed, his prize pit bull, Tuffy, struggles to keep his legs moving on the treadmill to which Big Joe has chained him. His father's plea even leads Joe Lon to reflect upon his own legs. "He looked at his legs as he was going down into the little room behind the counter. Who would have thought them wheels, wheels with four-five speed for forty yards, would have come to this in the world," he thinks (18). Threat of amputation or degradation of the legs is a principle example in the novel of displaced Freudian content.

That mythic subtext can be characterized more explicitly as the Oedipal love of a son for his mother. Crews's novel instantiates Marthe Robert's claim that "During the whole of its history the novel has derived the violence of its desires and its irrepressible freedom from the Family Romance," and further, that "Since the Oedipus complex is a universal human phenomenon, all fiction, invention, and image making expresses it more or less explicitly" (167). By violently rejecting her husband's claims over her through suicide, and by expressing a preference for a physically "inferior" man—a travelling salesman whose double in the novel is the delicate and powerless Poncy—Joe Lon's mother initiated a unique and fractured Bastard narrative that plays out in several relationships in the novel. Roberts describes the Bastard's

situation: “the fantasy of [the child’s] illegitimacy necessarily presupposes [the mother’s] adultery . . . The child is now cruelly torn: having associated sexuality with ‘the Fall’ . . . he is forced to despise his beloved, precisely for what makes her attractive . . . while he admires, emulates, equals, or if possible surpasses the object of his hatred [his father] whom he aspires to kill” (165). Joe Lon’s role as the archetypal Bastard is complicated by the facts that, one, he knows his mother’s lover was only a lowly, “almost feminine-looking” salesman (*Snakes* 119), and, two, that his mother’s suicide swiftly and summarily defused any rivalry between himself and his father. Joe Lon is left with a twice-diminished conception of Big Joe, and, worse, he is forced to identify with him because neither can claim the woman’s love for themselves. Both men are bereft and have been changed by this experience of their own powerlessness. Joe Lon learns to fear weaker men, though he will never admit it. Thus Shep disrupts his conception of his high school flame. Berenice’s rejection of Joe Lon mirrors his mother’s rejection and destroys his conception of ideal order. Whereas Berenice “used to bubble a bottle like a goddam sawmill nigger” (112), she now prefers “a little something light” to drink (113); she has become feminized in the men’s eyes, a revealing irony considering she actually is a woman. His mother’s suicide also disturbs Joe Lon’s relationship to his father. With the sense of competition undermined, Big Joe becomes a haunting imago of failure and unworthiness that Joe Lon is terrified to discover he increasingly resembles. Finally, Joe Lon’s relationship with his wife, Elfie, is disturbed because Joe Lon cannot accept her love. Elfie offers him genuine affection and is by all evidence a devoted mother to their children, but though Joe Lon knows he has no reason not to love her, he cannot explain “where the anger came from” (11). After storming out of their trailer, he reflects, “Jesus, he wished he wasn’t such a sonofabitch. Elf was about as good a

woman as a man ever laid dick to . . . He just couldn't seem to help it" (12). His mother's abandonment precludes the possibility he will trust another woman's profession of love. It makes him "sick with shame and at the same time want to kill her [Elfie]" (11); these mingled feelings are precisely the torment of the Bastard.

If the Oedipal subtext of the novel and Joe Lon's existential crisis still do not inspire easy identification with his character, perhaps the plight of another character, who can be interpreted as an alternate protagonist, can steer the text more clearly toward the low mimetic mode. Joe Lon is undoubtedly monstrous in some respects, but Lottie Mae is more sympathetic; we can "respond to a sense of [*her*] common humanity" (Frye 123, emphasis added). Like Joe Lon, her consciousness is rendered in free indirect discourse, but her perspective is more closely aligned with the readers'. While integrally a part of the world of the novel, she stands outside it, too. As neither white nor male, her experience, the only female perspective to which we are granted access, differs radically from that of the other characters. And even though her relationship to that world is not consciously ironical, to her, the white folks' society seems as bizarre and dangerous as it does to the reader first encountering Crews's grotesque vision. Her perspective is partially a product of that world's strangeness—its injustice, its brutality—but it is still an outside view. As her brother, Brother Boy, says, "Soda crackers sho am crazy bout snakes, ain't they" (*Snakes* 68). The snake festival makes little sense to the black community in the novel, which, like the readers, comes to associate the figure of the snake with a horrific, shadowy evil. After being raped by Buddy Matlow, who had coerced her with a live rattlesnake, Lottie Mae "had dreamed of snakes" (65). In her dream, "she killed one of them with a stick . . . the stick in her hand was a snake. When she tried to turn it loose she saw that she could not because the

snake was a part of her. Her arm was a snake" (65). Lottie Mae's dream reflects both her courage and the corruption of her body, which she feels in the aftermath of her rape. Upon waking, she now sees the world as rife with serpents. She imagines tourists repeating the word "SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE," and she "half expected the heavens to open up and start sending down snakes" (68). Later she thinks, "White people were dangerous and snakes were dangerous and now the two were working together, each doing what the other told it to. She was sure she had seen a snake in a weeded ditch with the head of a white man" (122). Her experience of the rattlesnake roundup is inflected with a specifically black terror, but it resembles the reader's experience in more general respects. The world of the novel is strange, even threatening in its strangeness, in its obscenity or vulgarity or grotesqueness.

Lottie Mae is also curiously present in the novel's final apocalyptic moment. Joe Lon sees her, or believes he sees her, watching with his sister, Beeder, as he perishes. Is it the readers he sees, waiting to pass judgment? Beeder and Lottie Mae are linked in the story, though they differ in a particular, crucial way: while, at least until the final moment, Beeder observes the snake hunt at a distance, within the safety of her room, or tries to drown out the chaotic violence by turning up the volume on her television, Lottie Mae is forced to confront the danger. She must travel through town at her peril even when "There was not another black man or woman anywhere" because she believes "there was no use in hiding" (124). And it is Lottie Mae who ultimately achieves the novel's sole heroic act. In castrating Buddy Matlow she not only defends herself from further sexual abuse, but she also slays the serpent that oppresses her, striking out at the forces afflicting the whole town. While she is "superior neither to other [wo]men nor to [her] environment," still Lottie Mae takes control of her fate in a meaningful way, a triumph Joe Lon

is denied. If irony allows Crews to explore the underlying forces of his narrative, gestures of realism allow him to explore his character's anguish and the tragic side of human nature. Moreover, by telling the tale from Joe Lon and Lottie May's perspective, Crews subverts the readers' customary privileged vantage point and asks them to examine the world through the eyes of the citizens of Mystic.

CHAPTER 4
DECONSTRUCTING CHARACTER TO FIND THE HUMAN IN *BODY*

In *A Feast of Snakes*, the border between Joe Lon and the higher socioeconomic domain inhabited by Shep and the readers is delineated by Joe Lon's illiteracy. But Joe Lon is also divided from his sense of home, an alienation marked by his many family troubles. Taking a non-Freudian approach, critic Scott Romine argues that "the frontier humor that flourished in the South during the antebellum era acts as a kind of collective precursor text for Crews's fiction" (118), and the genre is distinguished by a "tension between games and civilization" (118). This tension is not "always or even usually resolved in favor of 'civilization,' which acquires in many works a feminized, unmanly connotation" (118). In the antebellum humor tradition, civilization denotes "the stable, constrictive structures of class and family" (118) and is frequently "personified in the figures of the 'charming creature' . . . and the dandy, the feminized upper-class male whose 'city airs' make him the butt of many a prank" (118-19). The duality of games and civilization also results in "the bifurcated image of woman as sex object and as wife" (120). In the male domain of games, the ideal woman is seen as no more than a collection of sexual traits, and "the category of 'wife' is excluded precisely because wives are embedded within 'civilization'" (120). Having graduated from the football field, Joe Lon is no longer able to participate in the masculine sphere of gaming, but neither is he content in the feminized sphere of "civilization." He is not yet ready to take on stable family life with Elfie, nor is he willing or able to acquire the skill of reading in order to pursue a football career at the university level. As Romine demonstrates, Joe Lon is suspended both between games and civilization (home or

family) and between youth and manhood. Even when the rattlesnake festival affords him a temporary chance to reenter the realm of games—of lifting weights with Willard and Duffy, of violently "playing" with Poncy on the dance floor—still Joe Lon is unsatisfied. Crews develops Joe Lon's liminal position, Romine argues, "by structurally situating him in relation to several other characters" (123). Willard is a younger version of himself, and Duffy has managed to strike a balance between both worlds: "A successful lawyer, he has mastered the [civilized] world that baffles the younger man" (123); he also traffics easily in the world of games, as his many trophies attest. What ultimately emerges from the game metaphor, Romine argues, is the sense that Crews's protagonists are pitted "against a 'world' hypostatized *as* an opponent, although the precise nature of this opposition usually remains ambiguous, and often involves metonymic displacements between an oppositional 'world' revealed to be the authentic opponent and the literal opponent of the game" (119-20). Thus Joe Lon's struggle carries serious consequences. If he does not prevail against the world itself, he is left with nowhere to turn. Citing the critic Michael Oriad, Romine asserts, "'survival' is the stake of any game" (qtd. 126), but he adds, "Because Crews's blood sports involve only minimal refraction and no subtlety, they tend to offer little mediation of violence, little protection against the zero-sum logic at their core" (126). The battle for survival in *A Feast of Snakes* is literal, both in the existential sense of seeking a place for one's self in the world and in the Darwinian sense of deadly competition.

This dire literalism is carried even further in Crews's 1990 novel, *Body*. Geographical and textual metaphors for the distance between classes, between games and home or civilization, are in this work radically contracted to the literal border between the self and the world, the skin. As Romine argues, in the world of bodybuilding, "Blood is a substance used to pump muscles,

not a metaphor for kinship obligations. The utopian dimensions of bodybuilding, then, are contingent upon the erosion of social metaphors and categories, and the consequent emphasis on the sheer materiality of the body" (127). The contrast between the game and home or family in the novel could not be starker; it is evidenced in the characters' divergent bodies. While everyone of the bodybuilding tribe "seemed perfect of his kind, teeth incredibly white, hair thick and wildly beautiful, eyes clear and shining with a kind of mindless confidence, as though the world would never die, could never die" (*Body* 17), the members of the Turnipseed clan are almost freakish in their physical appearances and acutely unhealthy. Earline and her mother Earnestine are extremely obese; Shereel's brother Motor has a hairy "pelt" described as a symptom of a "ruint gene" (134); and her father Alphonse is an inveterate chain-smoker and "about the size of a retired jockey who might have been a bit consumptive" (37). Yet, as Romine points out, "the Turnipseeds are not *primarily* bodies; they are social beings whose status as such takes precedence over their material existence" (129). And despite their repulsiveness to the bodybuilding community, it is not their bodies that threaten to disrupt Shereel's game, her chances of winning the Ms. Cosmos contest. Rather it is the claim they make on Shereel as a member of their family, as belonging to their blood in the sense of kinship. Shereel recognizes their claim and struggles to balance her desire to win with her obligation to her family. "She loved her family, all of them, dearly," she thinks. "But she did not need this . . . She wished with all her heart they had not come, and she had done everything possible to stop them, short of telling them straight out that they could not come. And of course that was impossible. They were, after all, blood" (*Body* 128). Competing resonances of "blood" meet at the boundary between game and family and inform Shereel's attempt to negotiate her identity.

The promise of what Romine calls bodybuilding's utopian dimensions—it "appears to offer a purely self-deterministic means of ascent for those with the 'right bones' and the will to endure pain" (126)—rests entirely upon "simulations, surfaces, and appearances" (126), and it is upon these appearances that Shereel founds her effort to sculpt her identity. John Kaimon's failure, in *Karate*, to see through simulations and surfaces leads to his rape by George and Marvin, but for Shereel, who has made appearances her game, the stakes are life and death. Unlike Kaimon, however, Shereel is not required to read appearance; rather she must *be* an appearance, the best in fact, if she is to claim the title of Ms. Cosmos. As Romine shows, although that title will bring fame and fortune, Shereel's "inability to articulate the precise nature of her quest suggests that fame and fortune are only peripheral. She begins to apprehend the true stake of the game when she finds, on the day of the competition, that she can no longer resist the notion that '[h]er whole future, the rest of her life, rested squarely on today'" (127). She thinks,

> On one side of the ledger was winning and its consequences. Maybe something was possible between Nail and her. But only if she was Shereel Dupont, Champion . . . He chewed up Dorothy Turnipseeds without even thinking, without ever tasting them. But he could not chew up a Shereel. Shereel Dupont, Ms. Cosmos, was somebody, somebody to reckon with . . . It was easy to see that name written across the sky. (*Body* 228)

For the designation "Ms. Cosmos" might be substituted the title "somebody." "Somebody," as Shreel conceives her, has a toughness that Dorothy lacks, that will hold up to brutal and chauvinistic men like Nail. "Somebody" confers power over even the most deranged and violent men. Like her assumed name, Shereel, "somebody" is a word whose components have symbolic ramifications. As the critic Matthew Guinn points out, "the 'she' in the first name implies a universal feminine appeal, while 'Dupont' connotes a parallel to the archetypal industrial company . . . and thus to commodity. 'Shereel Dupont' is less a name than a brand name" (112).

But Guinn passes over the obvious echo of the second half of the first name, "real." Dorothy Turnipseed's stage name thus presents her as a self-conscious fabrication, a Dupont, who nevertheless insists upon her own authenticity: "she's real." The name "*some* body," then, also insists on the exceptional nature of a particular body—a body both tougher and more real than most. "Somebody" is also the most convincing appearance, the most seamless and durable creation. The parallel between bodybuilding and fiction writing begins to surface. "Somebody" is also a name "written across the sky." Shereel's longed-for identity is a vast inscription, a detail that links it both to her own attempts at literal self-construction and to Crews's attempts to produce her in all her human complexity across the pages of his novel. Shereel's understanding of herself as a physical construction thus informs Crews's corporeal conception of character and his material understanding of the nature of writing itself. Characterization, like intensely visual description, becomes a technique by which Crews's philosophy of fiction writing is illuminated.

Literary production for Crews is, at its most basic level, the physical process of manufacturing text, and the material fact of the book serves as a testament to the strenuous labor of writing even as it testifies to the elusive immateriality of human nature. In *Karate*, Belt performs for Kaimon what he calls "A demonstration of truth . . . tameshiwari" (140). The karate master removes a stack of twenty roofing tiles from a box then strikes them with his head, breaking them cleanly down the middle; "John Kaimon knew what he had seen was true. And impossible" (140). Belt cites several additional examples of incredible physical feats until Kaimon counters with an amazing fact about Faulkner. "They say Faulkner wrote over twenty books!" he says. "That's *twenty*. Have you every actually *looked* in a book? I mean really looked? All them little words in there. All them letters" (141). Kaimon responds to Belt's twenty

tiles with Faulkner's twenty books, and his conception of the books is that they are no less physical than tiles. If anything, books are more physical because they are far more labor-intensive to build than tiles and because each of their components are also physical—words, letters, punctuation. By isolating the units of writing, which fill the book, Kaimon stresses the exponential difficulty of the task of authorship due to language's multiple tiers of organization, and he conflates writing with both labor and the materiality of the book. For Kaimon, signs comprise the book, not merely ink and paper, and signs themselves are material. The book signifies materiality; the fact of its materiality signifies work.

Kaimon further emphasizes the arduousness of the act of writing, "Did you ever think what that might take out of a man? Have you ever thought about sitting down with a pencil and copying a book? . . . I have . . . I copied the first twenty pages of a book called *The Sound and the Fury* and saw that it was impossible. It was there in front of me so it was true, a fact, but impossible" (141). On one hand, Kaimon's idea of authorship is romantic. The book is the repository, the condensation, of a writer's energy, and the transferral, the transformation of energy into a book, leaves the writer physically and spiritually exhausted. On the other, writing is a mechanical process. Kaimon's naïve idea that copying a text can approximate the act of authorship belies his understanding that authorship is merely impassioned or enthusiastic inscribing. The author is miraculously tough in his ability to endure the process of production, but Kaimon gives no indication that he thinks authors are more intelligent or creative or incisive than anyone else. Rather, they are like karate masters with a particular physical aptitude.

Body attests that Crews's understanding of writing is more complex. There are, however, correspondences between Shereel's crusade to make a name for herself and Crews's attitudes as

a younger, less mature writer. Matthew Guinn points out that Shereel, like the young author, "hopes to join an international culture, but her ambivalent attitude toward her rural background confuses her . . . The arrival of her family at the event threatens an intrusion of her grit past into the glamorous world of bodybuilding . . . and she feels herself at the center of a tense convergence of two disparate cultures" (112). Crews did, as Guinn puts it, "struggle for post-agrarian identity" (113)—he dramatizes his sense of distance from his rural upbringing in the final chapter of his autobiography, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, and Joe Lon's illiteracy can be seen as a negative assertion that writing is a passport to a higher socioeconomic, more cosmopolitan, sphere. Yet, from the beginning, Crews has had an antagonistic relationship with the so-called cosmopolitan world. Apart from the many biographical examples of his subversive stance toward the University of Florida, where he taught for over thirty years, the representatives of higher education in his fiction are typically depicted in a very harsh light. Dr. Sweet, in *A Feast of Snakes*, is condescending and out of touch, while the students, Susan Gender from the same novel, Betty from *The Hawk Is Dying*, and Chastity in *The Knockout Artist*, are each privileged and apathetic; Chastity is also manipulative and self-deluded.

Another parallel between Shereel and the young author connects the character's misguided hope for victory through purely physical means to Crews's early obsession with publication, which he hoped to achieve by sheer prolificness. As he says in his interview with Anne Foata, "I *wrote* four novels before I ever published one; my first published novel was actually the fifth novel I had written. I am one of those people who served a long apprenticeship, and wrote an awful lot of copy before anybody anywhere ever mentioned that I might have any talent, or that there was any promise, or potential: literally hundreds of stories, four novels, any

number of essays, all kinds of private experiments, simply trying to find my own voice and my own subject" (27). "I wanted to publish about as badly as any man has wanted to do anything *ever*," he tells Watson (59). Like Kaimon, sitting down to copy *The Sound and the Fury*, the young Crews tried to copy a novel by Graham Greene. "I took one of his novels," Crews says, "and reduced it to numbers: how many characters; how many days did the novel take; how many cities were involved; how far into the novel did the climax take place; where did the action turn; how many men, women, children, rooms. Then I sat down and tried to write novel using that skeleton" (Watson 52). Crews's quantification of Greene's novel, breaking the text down into its component parts, is a less naïve variation on Kaimon's attempt to reduce Faulkner's text into words, letters, and pages. Like Shereel building herself a new body, Crews was trying to build a novel piece by piece, an effort doomed to failure. As he would later reflect, "Of course . . . what I'm describing is a desperate ploy by the rankest kind of amateur who could find no help, no reader . . . Needless to say, the novel that resulted from this was an abominable piece of work—arbitrary, mechanical, and uninteresting" (Watson 52).

Just as the action of *Body* takes place after Shereel has already perfected her new physique, after she has already won an array of preliminary contests, so the book was written after Crews had already published ten novels and his critically acclaimed autobiography. Shereel is more than an image of Crews as a frustrated young writer; she is a creation and a reflection of a mature author wrestling with his craft. And just as Crews questions the ironic distance between himself and his characters in *A Feast of Snakes*, so in *Body*, he stages Shereel's struggle for identity as a meta-fictional question about the nature of the literary character. Namely, Crews asks whether it is possible to accurately represent immaterial and indeterminate human nature in

the material form of the novel, or whether all characters inevitably become, like Kaimon's signs, mere material units of fiction—counters to be manipulated and accumulated, prisoners (and victims) of the narrative machinery. This proposition recalls Crews's apprehensive attitude toward the word "symbol," mentioned above, and indeed, both Shereel and Marvella's trainers openly conceive of their contenders in symbolic terms. Wallace aligns Marvella with "the side of Olympian proportions . . . the side of unthinkable size. He had decided it was the American way. Where was the American who owned anything that he did not wish was bigger?" (*Body* 76). By contrast, Russell "bet his reputation on everything that was in contradistinction to Wallace's . . . he knew in his blood that bigness was finished. We had long since pushed west to the Pacific Ocean and there was nowhere else to go. What good were a million or so megaton nuclear bombs when we could not even kick the ass of a raghead named Khaddafi living in a tent in the middle of a fucking desert?" (76). In their speculations about the larger social or historical forces that might influence the outcome of the Ms. Cosmos contest, the trainers resemble the ironic, naturalistic novelist and readers of *A Feast of Snakes*. Their notions are ridiculous, however, in light of the self-reflexive nature of Crews's narrative. The author alone will determine the outcome of the contest, as he makes clear in the theatrical management, the literal staging of the climax. As Romine astutely observes, "For Crews, writing is a controllable domain structured by rules" (132), hence his emphasis on good technique and craftsmanship: "In his interviews, Crews speaks extensively on the craft of writing, and often rejects bad craftsmanship on grounds that border on the ethical" (219). Crews's climax is well-crafted, self-conscious suspense. The author leaves his protagonist standing onstage not once but twice, and the readers must wait while Shereel contemplates her position.

Shereel's thoughts, in this pivotal double moment (according to the rules of bodybuilding, the contestants must endure two separate trials, the first of which, pre-judging, ostensibly determines the winner, and the second of which, the "pose-down" (233) or nighttime show for the crowd, "may or may not be meaningless" (*Body* 234)), prove however, that the real uncertainty of the novel is not the outcome of the contest but rather the "darkness" (224, 225, 235) that lies just beyond the stage, just beyond Shereel's skin, and just beyond the boundaries of the novel itself. As Shereel stands onstage, waiting for others to pass judgment on her body—she "felt herself on the edge of an abyss. This was the ultimate test" (224)—Crews's novel and, ultimately, his entire *corpus*, also await judgment. The novel's suspense derives from the existential unknown that encroaches in this moment. If beating the world means surviving and finding a space for one's self, then losing means passing into oblivion, an inconceivable experience. Alone in her room before the final phase of the competition, Shereel thinks,

> On the other side of the ledger was the alternative to winning. And she did not know, could not imagine, the consequences of not winning. That side of the ledger was not only blank, it was dark, like the thick dark of the convention center where the howling voice of the audience came from. Behind her closed eyes in an effort of will, she tried to look away from that dark, look away from what she did not know and could not imagine. But try as she would, the dark stayed and she kept very still and forced a deep steady rhythm on her breathing. (229)

Shereel's will, responsible for her strange new body, fails to expel the darkness from her field of consciousness. Like Gaye Nell Odell, cathected by the karate scene on the beach, Shereel's vision narrows; she retreats within her subjective mind, figured as vision, and her breathing suggests her heightened sense of corporeality. This is precisely the moment when her isolation, her own sense of her materiality, is greatest: "She was pure body, the bodiness of body" (223), and she was "alone with herself again" (225). Oddly, however, Crews imbues her materiality

with an aura of immateriality. The "bodiness of body" suggests not sheer corporeality itself, but the essence of corporeality, the spirit or concept behind the physical reality. This immaterial or abstract state is linked to darkness's infiltration of her subjectivity and to the ambiguity of the nighttime show, which "may or may not affect the outcome of the contest" (234). In going head-to-head with her opponent, the monstrously large and conspicuously *black* Marvella, Shereel performs a kind of dance with the darkness, with death. This is "the place that had no rules . . . whatever one of them did, the other tried to go it one better . . . to defeat it. As though dancing to a music only they could hear" (234-35). When Marvella prevails, Shereel's careful control is overpowered by the crowd's wildness; "hysteria was the last thing Shereel remembered . . . She knew she must have stayed for pictures, and that she must have flexed and smiled . . . but she remembered none of it" (235-36). The world is already lost to her, as though she can no longer perceive and process reality. A shadowy indeterminacy like that which overtakes Joe Lon at the moment of his annihilation also eclipses Shereel Dupont.

This is the moment that interests Crews as a fiction writer, the moment when his carefully crafted characters are deconstructed. Shereel's demise is not merely the paranoid scenario of a novelist afraid of being relegated to obscurity, afraid his work will not pass critical muster or the test of time. Instead it signals his interest in the "inexplicable, almost blind terror" of the human condition, which emerges precisely when control and the will break down. But catastrophe humanizes Crews's characters in another respect. By violently exiting their respective narratives, Joe Lon and Shereel make a last desperate bid against the tyranny of the author over their fates. In other words, Crews's killing of his characters is indicative of a belief in human rebelliousness and freedom, a freedom the novelist is painfully aware his medium curtails. In the falling action

of the story, Shereel harnesses the very threat that had repeatedly menaced the bodybuilding tribe and uncannily foreshadowed her death in the form of Nail's knife. As a weapon, the knife is defined by its ability to penetrate the skin, a danger Nail's tattoo makes all too clear: below "the perforated heart in the middle of Nail's chest" are the instructions, "CUT HERE and under that IF YOU CAN" (62). Shereel's suicide, as Nail grimly remarks upon finding her body in the bathtub, is a display of "proper" cutting technique. "At least she had the courage to do it right," he thinks, "The incisions—thin, the work of a razor—were parallel and ran up her wrist from the heel of her hand" (238). Though far from victory in the conventional sense, Shereel's mode of suicide does emphasize that act's emancipatory implications. She releases her blood from her body, from the oppressive constraints imposed by her trainer and the discipline of bodybuilding, and she affirms her all-too-human fallibility and fragility, as against her bodily and textual materiality and durability. As Crews dispels mistaken impressions of superiority from Gaye Nell, Faulkner, his readers, and even himself, so he dispels any illusion of ideality from Shereel. At the same time, he asserts that bodily degradation, fallenness, and freakishness are essential to humanness, and thus, they are the proper subjects of the novel. The novelist can only hope to do them justice.

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