

Spring 2015

The rough south and new southern studies: Crossroads and constellations

Amanda Freeman
James Madison University

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The Rough South and New Southern Studies: Crossroads and Constellations

Amanda Freeman

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

English

May 2015

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Gaughran and Dr. David Jeffrey for their time and help on this project, and especially Dr. Jean W. Cash, whose expertise and mentorship have been absolutely invaluable to me over the past two years. She has spent countless hours with me in the classroom and outside it, directing my independent study on the Rough South, traveling to conferences with me, advising me on this thesis, on other projects, and much more. I am so thankful for her direction of this thesis and for her friendship.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | ii |
| Abstract..... | iv |
| Introduction: The Rough South in Critical Perspective..... | 1 |
| I. Reconsidering Harry Crews..... | 22 |
| II. Peering “Over the Edge”: Social Realism in Larry Brown’s <i>Joe</i> | 53 |
| III. Crossroads and Memory in William Gay’s <i>Provinces of Night</i> | 73 |
| IV. Conclusion..... | 93 |
| V. Works Cited..... | 95 |

Abstract

“The Rough South and New Southern Studies: Crossroads and Constellations” examines fiction by writers of the Rough South and interrogates the inadequate state of criticism on these working-class authors in New Southern Studies. New Southern Studies seeks to de-marginalize the South and to combat a sense of inferiority or irrelevancy in a multicultural and increasingly globalized world; but in this process, New Southern Studies has actually marginalized the region’s most vibrant form of contemporary fiction—Rough South literature. This marginalization springs partly from class-based prejudice, and partly from a concern that the Rough South is too provincial for New Southern Studies. Rough South fiction is not, however, as at odds with the concerns of New Southern Studies as may initially seem; serious scholars of the Rough South will find that its fiction opens dialogue rather than closing it. “The Rough South and New Southern Studies: Crossroads and Constellations” is an effort to open such dialogue, challenge class-based stereotypes, and validate study of Rough South fiction in academia. Chapter one studies the impact of stereotypes on interpretation Rough South literature by analyzing the tension between Harry Crews’s public and private personas. Chapter two focuses on the social implications of Rough South literature’s treatment of class by investigating Larry Brown’s use of social realism in *Joe*, a novel that compels readers to “peer over the edge” and acknowledge the appalling reality and prevalence of poverty in contemporary society (*Joe* 183). Finally, chapter three puts New Southern Studies and Rough South literature in conversation by finding parallels between William Gay’s *Provinces of Night* and trending topics in Southern criticism, particularly regarding time and historical memory as conceived of by Walter Benjamin.

Introduction

The Rough South in Critical Perspective

After reading Michael Kreyling's account of the Southern Renaissance in *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), Fred Hobson joked that he felt obliged to take a pledge: "I am not now, nor have I ever been, a member of the Agrarian/New Critic party. I have never shared the views of the Agrarians either politically or aesthetically, have never strayed into formalism, have rarely even performed a close reading of a canonical work" ("Business of Inventing" 670). His remark was more serious than facetious. As Kreyling attests, Southern criticism feels probably more acutely than Southern literature what Richard Gray calls "consciousness of its own marginality and even 'failure'" (4). Shame about the Southern past, as well as fear that the traditional hallmarks of Southern literature are quaint and outdated, persistently plague scholars of the South.

The emergence of New Southern Studies at the turn of the twenty-first century was a response to this sense of "failure." Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer articulate its mission in their introduction to the 2006 *American Literature* issue on New Southern Studies, describing the movement as an "intellectual enterprise" that aims to be "less preoccupied with exhausted images of patriarchal whiteness and rural idyll" and more concerned with the "transnational and cross-disciplinary" (692). New Southern Studies seeks to cut ties with its ignominious Agrarian past and to restore the reputation and international significance of the South—to de-marginalize the region and to combat a sense of inferiority or irrelevancy in a multicultural and increasingly globalized world. The designation of contemporary Southern fiction as "postmodern" or even

“postsouthern” epitomizes this self-conscious shift in critical perspective; New Southern Studies, it would seem, is trying to bury its inglorious past and succeed in refashioning a fresh face for Southern literature and criticism.

Despite these admirable efforts to refashion Southern identity in academic discourse, a certain amount of anxiety lingers. Though New Southern Studies probes the meaning of “Southern” with insight and urgency, some fear that it may be out of touch with much of contemporary Southern writing.¹ As Jan Nordby Gretlund puts it, “the southern literary world of 2010 does not in any tangible way reflect the somewhat naïve idealism of the academics behind this proposed paradigmatic shift... If literary critics propose what novelists should write, it is putting the cart before the horse” (4). The horse may be quite a different animal from what most critics in the cart want it to be; in fact, the concerns of present-day Southern writers and New Southern Studies critics appear somewhat at odds.

The most dominant trend in recent Southern literature emerges from an issue that New Southern Studies rarely addresses: class. Over the last few decades, fiction and non-fiction by and about the Southern poor and working-class have proliferated, constituting a definitive sea change in Southern literature—the disenfranchised rural poor are becoming the new face of Southern fiction. Hobson posited in 1991 that Southern literature from the 1970s onward was experiencing a fundamental shift in perspective and nine years later he confirmed this assessment, stating that “recent and remarkable working-class (and rural-poor) memoirs... may well become the most important direction in Southern

¹See Jan Nordby Gretlund, “Introduction” to *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today*, ed. Gretlund, U of South Carolina P, 2010; Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists*, Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2009; and Harilaos Stecopoulos, “The New Southern Studies and the New Modernist Studies,” *Philological Quarterly* 90.2/3 (2011): 125-136.

literary scholarship of the next decade” (673). The spectrum of writings by and about the southern working-class actually includes far more than autobiography—poetry, short stories, novels and other forms of non-fiction abound as well.

Broader national trends parallel the surge in working-class literature that the South has experienced since the 1970s, though criticism’s rather inadequate response to these various movements exacerbates the problem of defining them and determining relationships among them. A chief difficulty lies in nomenclature. Kim A. Herzinger accurately summed up the problematic nature of all labels associated with what she called the “New Fiction” in a 1985 issue of the *Mississippi Review* devoted to it: none of the terms associated with the movement, she concluded, “seemed to work; they were either prescriptive, baldly inaccurate, aggressively reductive, or blatantly derivative” (8). Twenty-five years later, critics have not succeeded in overcoming this obstacle or in effectively differentiating between various forms of what may broadly be called “blue-collar” literature. The pejorative nature of appellations now associated with this movement, such as “Grit Lit” and “Hick Chic,” clearly denote prejudice, while terms such as “Dirty Realism,” “K Mart Fiction” and “Minimalism” are perhaps more problematic in that they purport to define with equal condescension “common” literary forms and themes among disparate writers.²

The relationships among these terms and their histories remain ambiguous in most critical discussions. There is a tendency to conflate all blue-collar literature with the so-

²Herzinger’s list of derogatory names associated with the “New Fiction” also includes “Pop Realism,” “Neo-Domestic Neo-Realism,” “Coke Fiction,” and “Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism” (8).

called “Minimalism” of the 1980s headed by Raymond Carver.³ George Hovis defines minimalism as referring to fiction that arose during the 1980s that seeks to return to a “more realistic depiction of life, a more subdued tone and style, and, for many, a retreat from experimentation” (492-3). Not all working-class literature, however, is minimalist or non-experimental in style; Cormac McCarthy and William Gay, for instance, write about the blue-collar South in highly lyrical and often experimental prose. Though the blue-collar literature of the 1980s onward may bear some similarities to Minimalism, it constitutes a distinct literary movement marked more by similar thematic concerns than by stylistic similarities.

The Southern blue-collar movement has flourished in a way that has caught the attention of the popular press and that merits particular critical consideration; but the fact that “Grit Lit” has become the label most often associated with the movement is indicative of academia’s unwillingness to acknowledge its importance.⁴ “It is not by accident,” Rod Cockshutt posits, “that ‘grit lit’ is the moniker of choice employed by those literary snobs and scalawags who disparage (or perhaps secretly envy) the utter abundance and versatility of southern writing” (320). Robert Gingher, too, notes that “Grit Lit” is only “facetious shorthand” for “fiction devoted to the rough edges (‘grit’) of life” that typically deploys “stark, sometimes violent narratives of poor white

³Minimalism is also sometimes pejoratively referred to as “Dirty Realism” or “K Mart Realism.”

⁴For a discussion of the representation of Southern culture in popular media, see Allison Graham, “The South in Popular Culture,” *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, Malden: Blackwell, 2004, 335-351.

southerners” (319).⁵ Considering the negative connotations that “Grit Lit” carries, perhaps a better term for the purposes of Southern Studies is one advocated by Brian Carpenter and coined by Gary Hawkins in his documentary series on Crews, Tim McLaurin and Larry Brown: “Rough South.”

Carpenter’s own distinction between Grit Lit and Rough South is somewhat problematic: he describes Grit Lit as “typically blue color or working class, mostly small town, sometimes rural, occasionally but not always violent, usually but not necessarily southern,” and “Rough South” as “mostly poor, white rural, and unquestionably violent—Grit Lit’s wilder kin or Grit Lit with its back against the wall and somebody’s going to get hurt” (xxvii). In defining Rough South literature in these terms, Carpenter unnecessarily highlights the kinds of uncomplimentary connotations that “K Mart Realism” carries; indeed, he and Franklin knowingly feed into stereotypes throughout their anthology by emphasizing what Carpenter admits are the Rough South’s “more sensational aspects” (xx). Carpenter and Franklin’s contribution to the conversation about working-class literature, and particularly their promotion of the term Rough South, is significant; nevertheless, a redefinition of “Rough South” is in order. Though the term seems a suitable one for Southern Studies, Carpenter’s definition paints the Rough South as some kind of twice-“othered” madman in the basement—Grit Lit’s barbaric, insane brother with teeth bared and eyes rolling. Serious scholars of the Rough South need to abandon Carpenter’s notion of “Grit Lit’s wilder kin” in service of a simpler definition of

⁵Brian Carpenter speculates that Harry Crews’s “Grits” column, written for *Esquire* in the 1970s, may be the origin of the term “Grit Lit” (xxvi). Robert Rebin identifies Jonathan Yardley as being the first to popularize the term “Hick Chic” in a column of the 25 March 1985 *Washington Post* (67).

Rough South as Southern Grit Lit—that is, literature written from the perspective of the Southern poor or working-class, often rural in setting, and chiefly about poor whites.

Despite the overwhelming presence of Rough South fiction today, critical analysis of Rough South literature is scarce. Scholars seem reluctant to acknowledge any trends in contemporary Southern literature or to offer conclusive statements about the current state of Southern fiction, preferring instead to make vague observations about the fluid and uncertain nature of Southern-ness.⁶ This hesitation is in part understandable, since identifying a “trend” in Southern literature necessarily involves homogenization. Nevertheless, as Matthew Guinn and others have observed, there is at least a “nascent network of themes and approaches to writing about the South that are beginning to gel into as much of a pattern as the postmodern era will allow” and which demand critical analysis (“Writing in the South” 571).

The underlying irony is that in the process of attempting to de-marginalize the South, New Southern Studies has actually marginalized the region’s most vibrant form of contemporary fiction. This unfortunate paradox indicates both academic prejudice against the Grit Lit genre, and also a syndrome that Hobson called the *Southern Rage to Explain* (1983)—a fixation with apologizing for the past that in Southern criticism has developed into a full-fledged obsession with spotting a neo-Agrarian “behind every bush” (Hobson “Business of Inventing” 670). Densely theoretical methodologies and anti-Agrarian agendas, accompanied by more than a hint of defensiveness and timidity, often distract

⁶See for example the conclusion of James C. Cobb’s “Searching for Southern Identity,” *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, 591-607; or the conclusion of Scott Romine’s “Where is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age,” *South to a New Place*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U, 2002, 23-43.

New Southern scholars from candidly assessing the current state and possible future of Southern letters.

In the words of Sharon Monteith and Suzanne W. Jones, it is time for New Southern Studies to “tie the mythic southern balloon down to earth” and to examine real trends in recent Southern literature in order to achieve insight into the future of the field (10). One of the first steps in this direction must be simple recognition of the fact that blue-collar authors and characters now occupy a prominent place in Southern fiction. What Linda Tate identifies as an Appalachian Renaissance is only part of a larger movement—a third phase in Southern Literature narrated from the previously alienated perspective of the poor white Southerner (140). In addition to acknowledging this fact, literary scholarship must also abandon all pretense of superiority in its characterizations of the blue-collar movement. As Carpenter observes, even praise for Rough South or Grit Lit authors often takes the form of a “backhanded compliment” (xx). Crews and Brown, for instance, rarely received praise from critics or reviewers that did not refer to the authors’ low-class backgrounds: Brown was proclaimed “King of White Trash” and “Bard of the Bottoms,” and Crews was repeatedly referred to at best as a “Wild Man” (Perry 147-8, Dees 119, Shaftel).⁷ By ostracizing blue-collar literature from the hallowed halls of Southern letters, Southern criticism has unwittingly (perhaps) repeated the bigotry and segregation of its past for which it so desperately seeks to compensate, only substituting class for race. Before all else, the Rough South movement deserves critical recognition.

⁷For more on the construction of Brown’s public persona, see Keith Perry, “‘Building’ Larry Brown(s) at Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill,” *Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South*, ed. Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry, Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2008, 130-55.

One reason for academia's hesitation to take Rough South literature seriously may be that it represents a return to the regional—a direction that initially seems at odds with New Southern Studies' privileging the transnational over the local. Towns such as Mystic, Georgia in Crews's *A Feast of Snakes* or Toccoola, Mississippi in Brown's *Joe* still bear a profoundly regional significance, and in Leigh Anne Duck words, "incorporating rural spaces into such transnational approaches can prove challenging" (259). New Southern Studies critics want the academic community and general audiences to view the South as postmodern and progressive, not backwards and Agrarian; acknowledging Grit Lit as the new visage of Southern literature would seem to undermine this goal. In addition to an unwanted emphasis on the regional, Rough South literature presents another difficulty: as Guinn argues, contemporary Southern authors "do not conform to the traditional critical paradigms established by Renaissance critics," mainly because their characters do not share all the same familiar Southern values and traditions ("Writing in the South Now" 571). John Staunton also notes that "rural characters seek to outrun the effects of their own, more immediate, past deeds, suffering from a decidedly more blue-collar version of Percy's dislocation of the self from itself" (46). These poor characters are often entirely unaware of the mythic Southern past and consequently unburdened by it; Rough South literature is often more focused on the present than haunted by the past, and thus demands a critical approach that contrasts quite strongly with the traditional framework for Southern novels.

Because of these difficulties and the limited scholarly attention that Rough South literature has garnered over the past few decades, a critical approach has not yet been firmly established for the genre. The apparent conflict between New Southern Studies

and blue-collar literature, as well as some academic disdain towards self-made authors without much formal education, leave many scholars at a loss when it comes to discussing this genre from a meta-critical perspective. The question is, as Rebein puts it, “What happens when the margins become the center?” (67). How do we shift our critical framework to fit this new kind of literature? How should New Southern Studies approach the Rough South?

Since the turn of the century, three general critical approaches to Rough South literature have arisen in the literary community, though each is still in nascent form: one emphasizes regionalism as a critical lens, another seeks to define the movement in terms of realism (sometimes even naturalism), and the last focuses on defining the movement based on a mix of racial, socioeconomic and class issues. The regionalist approach engages most fully with New Southern Studies, contesting the adequacy of globalization and spatial instability as concepts for analyzing much of contemporary Southern fiction. Scott Romine’s remark on the future of Southern literature is typical of New Southern criticism, as is Robert Brinkmeyer’s: Romine believes that the “hyperrealism” of Barry Hannah and Lewis Nordan is an indication that Southern literature may “dispense with reality altogether.... It would surely be ironic,” he continues, “should the South come to exist as a weightless simulacrum, a displaced identification, a condition of pure performativity. But as C. Vann Woodward pointed out many years ago, irony and the South have never been strangers” (43). Brinkmeyer, too, believes that in post World War II Southern literature, place and regional identity are “less sites of struggle than casually invoked backdrops for atmosphere and parody” (“Renaissance” 163). Southern literature after the 1950s, according to Brinkmeyer, “has yet to be defined by any encompassing

designation, in part because of the tremendous diversity of expression resulting from the waning of regional issues” (“Southern Literary Renaissance” 163).

Romine’s prediction and Brinkmeyer’s assessment seem based more on wishful thinking than honest analysis of contemporary Southern fiction—an oversight that Gretlund addresses in no uncertain terms: “To seriously question the existence of a southern identity, you will have to be purblind to many facts about living in the South,” he declares unequivocally (2). Rough South literature, which makes up a large portion of contemporary Southern fiction, relies heavily on a sense of material, regional identity. Paul Lyons also believes that the significance of regional identity in contemporary Southern fiction is undeniable, and he eloquently defends regionalism as a viable framework within which to consider Rough South literature in particular. For Lyons, viewing Southern regionalism as dying or as antagonistic to multiculturalism involves a “regressive” definition of the term (97). Instead, Lyons advocates what he calls a “critical regionalism” that recognizes the postmodern, transnational elements of the South while also acknowledging the “concept of historic ‘regions’ in the U.S. as value-full, rich, sedimented cultural ground for working through the predicaments or possibilities of contemporary culture” (118).

Rural life in the contemporary South constitutes the subject matter of many books like Larry Brown’s *Joe*—books that Lyons believes “*are experienced* as southern by readers, publishers, reviewers, critics, and that cannot simply be considered ‘retro,’ forms of nostalgia, aesthetic recycling, or literary tourism” (104). Whatever relationship between the local and the global we establish in theory matters little in practice to characters in Rough South novels. In fact, according to Lyons, much of contemporary

Southern literature actively resists globalization and capitalist consumer culture: characters “have no framework for identifying themselves as subjects within history, class struggle, or homogenizing mass culture” (111). Their humble lifestyles and contained existences within highly localized communities give these characters a certain freedom not only from an increasingly commercialized, homogenized culture, but also from the infamous burden of Southern history. “The ‘region concept,’” Lyons concludes, “thus remains a more appropriate frame for books like *Joe* than local, national, or transnational frames, as it implicitly does for discussing relations among the peoples occupying its ‘postage stamp’ of Mississippi” (116). Much would be lost by denying the importance of region in contemporary Southern literature, Lyons argues, since much of contemporary Southern fiction claims a Southern identity intimately linked to region and local landscape.

At the same time, however, the effects of globalization have become so ubiquitous that it is hard to imagine a community so sheltered that it has escaped the process entirely. The “region concept” cannot be understood as entirely distinct from or opposed to the global; connections always exist between even the most rural Southern towns and other places. As Lyons recognizes, Rough South fiction may resist the process of globalization, but it does not remain untouched by it. Duck’s observation about regionalism in modernist Southern fiction is particularly apropos to discussion of contemporary Rough South literature: she claims that it is possible “to find nonoppositional relationships between diverse sites of modernism and to incorporate insistently rural texts into investigations of a multifarious and porous region” (263). The Rough South may be slow to experience commercialization and economic growth, but

the regional nature of Rough South literature does not preclude universal concerns or imply that the area and its literature are culturally primitive and insular. On the contrary, we can often identify productive points of contact between the Rough South and other places, times and peoples.

Yet though emphasis on regional identity and its intersection with globalism proves an illuminating approach to Rough South literature, the “region concept” does not adequately define the most essential elements of the Rough South movement—nor is it meant to do so. Southern literature has always involved some expression of regional identity, however fraught the notion, and that the South has never cohered as a single entity never precluded the possibility of claiming a regional Southern identity. To establish the continued relevance of region in Rough South fiction is only to affirm a degree of continuity between contemporary Southern fiction and its literary heritage.

One way that critics attempt to explain the distinctive nature of Rough South fiction is by describing the movement in terms of style: Rebein’s *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism* (2001) represents this attempt to unite Rough South literature based on stylistic similarities. Rebein argues that the “white trash aesthetic” is part of a recent literary trajectory that constitutes a departure from the self-conscious “metafiction” of postmodernism and a return to the American realist tradition (17). The term “postmodern,” Rebein argues, is increasingly unable to account for much of modern American and Southern fiction that is now “downwardly mobile” in terms of class (73), realist in style and content, and at the same time “resolutely *topical*” (165). In Rebein’s view, literature by Southern poor whites is part of a larger project by ethnic minorities—Native American, Chinese American, African American, and Latino/a, for

example—that seeks to create through fiction a “window on a world that is both alien and recognizably our own” (20). Some scholars, including Guinn, contend that this line of influence extends even to American naturalism, though such arguments are largely confined to readings of individual texts and authors.⁸ Scholars like Rebein and Guinn who term Grit Lit “realist” acknowledge that recent authors employ a new brand of realism inflected by postmodernism—a revitalized form of realism that Rebein describes as “more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis” (20). Guinn, too, identifies the realism of writers like Bobbie Ann Mason as a “critical realism” that combines social commentary with realist technique (“Writing in the South Now” 577).

Most critics would agree that Grit Lit in the South and elsewhere employs realist techniques, though it does not conform in all ways to tropes associated with the American realist tradition. Nevertheless, the distinction between realist (or naturalist) techniques and realist themes is vital, and somewhat understated in most discussions. The subject matter of the American realists of the late nineteenth century was mainly bourgeois and highly introspective; the psychological processes of upper-class characters are a major theme of Henry James’s novels. Grit Lit thus constitutes a notable departure from traditional realism in terms of class—one that Rebein notes, but which does not really inform his overarching thesis about contemporary literature in the South and elsewhere.

⁸See, for instance, Tim Edwards’s “‘Everything is Eating Everything Else’: The Naturalistic Impulse in Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes*,” *Perspectives on Harry Crews*, ed. Erik Bledsoe, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 63-77; and Guinn, “The New Naturalism of Larry Brown,” *After Southern Modernism*, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000, 35-56.

This is not to suggest that Grit Lit and Rough South literature do not use realist and minimalist stylistic devices; indeed, many authors do. But this observation is not groundbreaking. Both Rebein and Guinn express discontent with the methods of postmodernist criticism and offer their realist/naturalist approaches as innovative and revolutionary; in the end, however, their use of old critical frameworks is as inadequate and backward-looking as the methods they disparage.

If we define the blue-collar literary movement in terms of technique, we are missing its most important and unique contribution to Southern letters in terms of thematic content and narrative perspective. One of the most essential and unique features of Rough South fiction is its revolutionary treatment of class—a category frequently neglected in Southern critical discourse. The omission of class in discussions of Southern literature is often glaring, as Erik Bledsoe observes: “In the race-class-gender triumvirate of much contemporary criticism, class is still the poor cousin who is often ignored while its higher-profiled relatives are wined and dined by academics” (68-9). Dorothy Allison corroborates Bledsoe’s claim. Speaking from personal experience, Allison relates that the “central fact” of her own identity and of her fiction is “the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved” (15). Even communities particularly attuned to the impact of marginalization, Allison notes, demonstrate a limited understanding of the role of class in shaping identity (xiii). The truth of Allison’s observation applies to much of Southern criticism. Kreyling’s catalogue of dominant theoretical approaches in *New Southern Studies*, for example, contains everything but class: he defines the “categories of inquiry that are shaping the neo-age of southern studies most profoundly” as including “criticism

and theory in gender, sexuality, race, the body, and redefined issues of region generated by postcolonial studies and ‘new’ geography” (Kreyling “Toward a ‘New Southern Studies’” 7). Even a cursory analysis of contemporary Southern literature, however, demands that class be included on this list; indeed, class may well become the most important critical category in discussions of contemporary Southern writing.

Hobson posits that in academia, the reluctance to treat class seriously as a critical category may arise “partly because an honest discussion of class (its myriad meanings, its curious intersections with race and gender) demands more of the critic than perhaps any other area” (“Inventing the South” 673). Academics such as Nell Sullivan offer a more disturbing explanation, arguing from personal experience that deep-seated class prejudice plays a large role in the exclusion of class from Southern academic discourse.⁹ Perhaps contributing to this prejudice is the apparent widespread blindness in academia regarding the contemporary, material reality of poverty. Comments such as Jon Smith’s seem to imply that affluence has entirely subsumed poverty in the South: “At the beginning of the twenty-first century,” he claims, “it is just about impossible (except in very bad faith) for any individual anywhere on the planet to be anything *but* hybrid, globalized, postcolonial” (90). But to say that poverty in the South, or indeed anywhere in America, is a thing of the past is to ignore a serious socioeconomic reality. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that record-high numbers of Americans were living in poverty in 2012: 46.5 million people, or 15% of Americans, were living below the poverty

⁹See Nell Sullivan, “Academic Constructions of ‘White Trash’; Or, How to Insult Poor People without Really Trying,” *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America*, ed. Vivyan C. Adair and Sandra L. Dahlberg, Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003, 53-66.

threshold, which itself is scarcely an accurate measure of the annual salary necessary to maintain a decent lifestyle. That same year, research determined that 6.6% of the U.S. population was in deep poverty—50% below the poverty line. Moreover, research published by the Bureau in 2013 confirms that the South is by far the poorest region of the U.S.; Mississippi had the lowest median household income, and the bottom ten states on the list were Southern.¹⁰

In other words, poverty and class issues are far from outmoded in contemporary literature, especially in the South. An even more overlooked aspect of Southern poverty is the presence of the poor white. Cultural studies scholars such as Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz have taken steps to theorize whiteness, debunking stereotypes of “white trash” and analyzing the implications of the category “white trash” on the concept of white privilege.¹¹ Literary criticism of the Rough South builds on these insights, but the need for further problematization of whiteness and deconstruction of the poor white stereotype is pressing.

Few literary scholars recognize the central importance of this complex class-based, racial and socioeconomically inflected issue to Rough South literature. Bledsoe and Carpenter constitute a notable exception: according to them, the unique contribution of Rough South literature is its firsthand depiction of South poverty from the perspective

¹⁰See National Center for Law and Economic Justice, “Poverty in the United States: A Snapshot,” Nclej.org, 2013, Web; and United States Census Bureau, “Income of Households by State Ranked from Highest to Lowest Using 3-Year-Average Mediums,” Census.gov, 2013, Web.

¹¹See Wray, Matt, and Annalee Newitz, eds. *White Trash: Race And Class In Americ.*, New York: Routledge, 1997; and Kirby Moss, *The Color of Class: Poor Whites and the Paradox of Privilege*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.

of the poor white Southerner, whose voice has been hitherto silent in literature. Of course, Carpenter notes, the presence of the poor white in Southern fiction is not a new phenomenon; scholars trace literary depictions of poor whites back to the time of William Byrd. Previous depictions of the Southern poor white, however, consisted mainly of caricatures: as Bledsoe states, the poor white character was always either “comic, villain or victim” (70). Even Faulkner’s Snopes clan fits into the category of the comic poor white, though Bledsoe characterizes the derision aimed at the Snopes as often more “nervous” than hilarious (69). Bledsoe describes their rise in fictional Yoknapatawpha County and in the real world as marked by profound fear among the middle and upper classes, and notes that various pejorative and oddly socially acceptable labels for poor whites such as “redneck,” “white trash,” and “cracker” demonstrate a same mixture of condescension and anxious desire to keep these “others” in their “proper place” (69-71).

Flannery O’Connor articulates the problem with most pre-1970s fiction about the poor in her short story “The Crop” as untalented aspiring writer Miss Willerton deliberates how to begin her novel: “Social problem. Social problem. Hmmm. Sharecroppers! Miss Willerton had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers but, she reflected, they would make as arty a subject as any, and they would give her that air of social concern” (733). With this not-so-subtle jab, O’Connor accuses authors such as Erskine Caldwell of lurid sensationalism and exploitation of the lower classes. In Bledsoe’s words, these authors wrote about poor whites “from the outside looking in” (70).

The representation of poor whites remained much the same until the mid-1970s, when the emergence of authors such as Crews and, a bit later, Allison initiated a “shift in

southern literature away from the genteel, aristocratic-agrarian view of old” (Carpenter xxvii). With Crews and Allison, Carpenter believes, “the decision to write their own stories about their own people became a way not only to confront their troubled pasts but to reclaim and redefine a tradition that had often treated them and their kind with contempt” (xvii). Rough South literature was born when authors began to write about the poor from a within-class perspective that troubled stereotypes and offered a realistic, if harsh and un-idealized, view of poverty.¹²

At the same time, Carpenter clarifies, “Grit Lit is not about redneck manifestos or white victimhood or the identity politics of the ‘new minority’.... If anything, it is about getting beyond the caricature and introducing a little compassion and complication into the conversation” (xxvi). It would be a gross mischaracterization to paint Rough South fiction as the new protest novel. Rough South writers do not set out to right social wrongs; most of them begin by wanting to tell a story in traditional Southern story-telling fashion, and they simply write about what they know. Authors like Crews, Brown, Allison and Gay speak with firsthand authority on their subject matter; indeed, the tales of their determination to become writers despite countless obstacles and disadvantages rival those in their fiction.

It is possible to include only those authors who grew up in poverty among the ranks of Rough South writers; but, as Carpenter relates, such a biographical approach

¹²See also David A. Davis, “Abjection and White Trash Autobiography,” *Storytelling, History, and the Postmodern South*, ed. Jason Phillips, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2013, 187-204; Sarah Robertson, “Poor Whites in Recent Southern Fiction,” *Literature Compass* 9.10 (2012): 631-41; and Carsten Schinko, “Why Trash? Thirteen Ways of Looking at Poor (White) Folks,” *Amerikastudien* 55.1 (2010): 143-64.

proves limiting. Regarding his and Franklin's anthology, he says that in "restricting ourselves only to those who had 'walked the walk,' so to speak, we would be neglecting the work of a good many others who had just as much to say on the subject, namely, Barry Hannah and Cormac McCarthy" (xv). In fact, Cormac McCarthy lived a fair amount of his life in poverty; *Suttree* is largely autobiographical. Still, the point is that one does not necessarily need to be born in the Rough South to write about it; Rough South fiction is more about the "response of the southern imagination to that place" than pure memoir (Carpenter xv). In the end, Carpenter concludes, "The Rough South is not so much a fixed place as it is a point of departure" (xxvii). From there, it may branch into realism, naturalism, southern gothic or noir, but the original starting point remains the within-class perspective of the poor, usually white Southerner.

The extent to which Rough South literature will incorporate writers of other ethnicities has yet to be determined; for now, the deconstruction of the poor white stereotype has proven a dominant trend in Rough South literature. The impact of this fictional refashioning of poor white identity has monumental implications for Southern criticism. Even today, critics like Diane Roberts often allude to the Southern past and the "white South" as if it were a hegemonic entity: "Southern no longer means 'white,' as it used to," she claims, "nor does it imply a simple white/black binary, but now includes Latinos and Asians in its mix" (372). By "white South," she clearly means the upper-class white South; but this distinction is apparently unnecessary even within the allegedly progressive literary community, and the result is cancellation of poor whites.

Truthfully, "Southern" now also includes a white/white binary. Rough South literature troubles the hitherto monolithic conception of the "white South," and in doing

so, broadens not only the future of Southern fiction, but also rewrites its past. In this way, the Rough South movement fits perfectly within New Southern Studies' redrawing of boundaries and refashioning of its formerly Agrarian identity. Jason Phillips's emphasis on the narrative nature of history in *Storytelling, History, and the Postmodern South* (2013) is particularly relevant to the silencing of the poor white voice in literature—a voice that is now challenging the master narratives of the present and the past. As New Southern Studies crosses boundaries and traces global connections, it will need to consider this narrative shift and to account for the central and complex role of the poor white in past and present southern communities.

Though critics have for the most part turned a blind eye to these blue-collar authors, the Rough South and New Southern Studies have much to gain from more honest and unbiased interaction. The chapters that follow are an effort to open this dialogue, challenge class-based stereotypes, validate the study of Rough South fiction in academia, and alleviate any anxieties scholars may harbor about the parochial nature of the genre. Chapter one studies the impact of stereotypes on interpretation Rough South literature by analyzing the tension between Crews's public and private personas. Readers tend to conflate Crews's biography with his fiction, which actually works to deliberately undercut this façade; *A Feast of Snakes* in particular reveals the complexity of Crews's fiction and establishes a remarkable relationship between his work and the poetry of William Blake. Chapter two focuses on the social implications of Rough South literature's treatment of class by investigating Brown's use of social realism in *Joe*, a novel that compels readers to "peer over the edge" and acknowledge the appalling reality and prevalence of poverty in contemporary society (*Joe* 183). Finally, chapter three puts

New Southern Studies and Rough South literature in conversation by finding parallels between Gay's *Provinces of Night* and trending topics in Southern criticism, particularly regarding time and historical memory as conceived of by Walter Benjamin.

Many Southern critics seem to fear that acknowledging Rough South fiction will thwart future progress—a fear partially based on the assumption that working-class authors like Crews, Brown and Gay cannot contribute significantly to the sophisticated conversations taking place in New Southern Studies. Serious scholars of the Rough South will find, however, that Rough South fiction opens dialogue rather than closing it. Regional issues do not come at the cost of universal ones, and earning an M.F.A. is not the only way to become educated. In fact, Tom Franklin argues, “in a country where master of fine arts programs exhale new writers like stale breath,” Grit Lit comes as a breath of fresh air; Crews, Brown and Gay read voraciously and learned more about writing from their own life experience and reading than from professionals in academia, and they bring a sense of empathy and authenticity to the page that cannot be taught (vii). But the merits of Rough South literature do not rest on authenticity alone; critics who delve deeply enough into the Rough South will discover that in every localism, there is globalism—whether it be allusions to Blake in Crews's novel about a rattlesnake rodeo in Georgia, shrewd interrogation of failing political systems in Brown's *Joe*, or echoes of Benjamin's theories of temporality and memory in Gay's *Provinces of Night*. We need only trace these connections to establish what Benjamin calls “constellations” in which the Rough South and Global South converge (263).

Chapter One

Reconsidering Harry Crews

Erik Bledsoe relates one of the “tamer” stories about Harry Crews: at a departmental meeting at the University of Florida, one professor made a snide remark about the value of creative writing as opposed to scholarly publications in consideration for tenure. “Crews,” Bledsoe says, “stood up and announced his willingness to pile his books on the goddamn scale, match them up pound for pound against the production of any scholar in the room. No one took him up on it” (*Perspectives* xiii). This story, Bledsoe continues, is one of his favorites because it highlights not only part of Crews’s charismatic and notoriously intimidating personality, but also his utter commitment to his craft. Crews lived to write: he stated unequivocally that writing gave his life meaning and that even without a publisher or readers, he would continue to work (Burt 88). “I’d write novels if I had to send them out to sea in a bottle,” he mused to Al Burt. “I need to work. I have guilt feelings if I don’t work, sourceless anxiety” (88). Writing superseded all else for Crews; it was “right in the center” of his life, his meaning and his “avocation” (Foata 42, Burt 88).

This earnestness may seem somewhat surprising considering Crews’s deliberate disassociation from the scholarly community. Despite his seriousness as a writer, Crews never depicted himself as a scholar; he preferred to highlight the differences between himself and the academy. This gesture was not one of humble deference; on the contrary, he was proud of his self-chosen alienation from academic circles. “I have been in the University of Florida for more or less twenty years,” he told Tom Graves, “but I’ve been *in* it, never *of* it. I have no friends in the university” (142). This is not to say that Crews

harbored personal grudges against his peers or nursed a deep-seated hatred of academia—he respected many writers with M.F.A.s and Ph.Ds, and had tried to earn one himself. The University of Florida had rejected his application, and Crews reveled in the irony of his later being offered a teaching position there: “One of my major triumphs in the world,” he claimed more seriously than facetiously, “is that I now direct a degree that I was turned down to study for at the very school that turned me down” (Crowder 194). Despite his wariness of academia, Crews freely admitted that he enjoyed his professorship and that it fostered his creativity: “I find that I like to teach,” he related in an interview with Sterling Watson. “I like to talk to students and have them talk to me. And the university has been very kind and generous with me. I’ve all the time in the world I need to write, more than enough time... I don’t ever visualize quitting teaching” (60).

Instead of conforming to expectations of a university professor, however, Crews purposefully cultivated a sensational, rebellious public persona that clashed with his status as a successful professor. Perhaps for this reason, academia has been slow to recognize his literary impact. David K. Jeffrey’s *A Grit’s Triumph* (1983) long remained the single collection of critical essays on Crews until the *Southern Quarterly*’s 1998 Crews issue. Bledsoe’s *Perspectives on Harry Crews* (2001) is the second and last published essay collection to date, and Crews now maintains a tenuous hold in academia; only a handful of essays on him have appeared since 2001, and Jeffrey’s collection is long out of print. Crews poses a puzzle to scholars: instead of remaining either inside or outside his scholarly community, he chose to occupy a controversial middle ground, deliberately coupling highbrow and lowbrow culture in a way that many found unsettling.

Crews knew that his Mohawk haircut and tattoos troubled his colleagues: “I designed this haircut myself,” he confided to Ruth Ellen Rasche, “and I did it with malice and forethought” (294). Crews’s most well-known tattoo encapsulates his in-between identity: on his right bicep are an image of a skull and a line from E.E. Cummings: “How do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mister Death?” Crews delighted in pushing limits, blurring boundaries and challenging stereotypes: university professor and universal badass, avant-garde modernist poetry and skull tattoos—such are the paradoxes of Harry Crews.

Public perception of Crews, however, even among academics, remains largely unattuned to the enigmatic qualities of his person and of his work. Critics frequently overlook his seriousness and subtlety in favor of a perhaps warranted but ultimately one-dimensional representation of Crews as “the baddest bad boy of American letters” (Bledsoe, *Perspectives* x). “Put it all together,” Brian Carpenter quips—the rough exterior, proudly tattooed arm, gruff manners and legendary life—“and Crews looks more pit bull than literary lion” (xiv). The image of Crews-as-pit-bull is as difficult to ignore while reading his fiction, most of which seems to reflect his public persona. Interviewers and reviewers invariably venture sensational portraits of Crews’s fearsome appearance and often dwell more on his personal life than on his writing: Burt, for example, observes that the then thirty-nine-year-old Harry Crews looked “a little like a primitive who has tried civilization and was unimpressed,” and Joann Biondi notes the bizarre image he cut as a professor: “Deep inside the ivy-covered campus of the University of Florida, Crews looks like a madman who eats roofing nails for breakfast... His thick lips occasionally shift into a grin that is insane-asylum frightening” (82, 263).

The press in particular eagerly seize upon the image of Crews as a “wild man”: Margalit Fox, in her elegy on Crews in the *New York Times*, argues that though Crews’s “darkly comic, biting satirical, grotesquely populated and almost preternaturally violent novels” have attracted a cadre of fans, they “were not the stuff of best-seller lists, in part because they bewildered some readers and repelled others” (Shaftel). Most readers falter beneath his unflinching depiction of the Rough South, she argues; they have no interest in his harsh fiction.

Crews’s personal life is another matter; as Fox succinctly puts it, “Anything in Mr. Crews’s fiction was resoundingly eclipsed by the facts of his own life.” It would seem that discussion of Crews’s work is incomplete without reference to the more compelling narrative of what Bledsoe calls “Harry Crews: The Legend” (*Perspectives* x). Oney observes that all writers like Crews run a similar risk of being “mythicized” and categorized: “Certain caretakers of literature,” he notes, “have consigned Crews to a place that one writer said was underneath a dark root of the southern literary tradition... A rumor that has reached minor mythic proportions holds that Harry Crews is nuts; that he writes about nuts” (93). The image of Crews as literary outlaw or wild bard of the backwoods enables easy branding and marketing of his fiction and facilitates quick dismissal of it by critics. Crews himself was quite aware of his reputation and the relatively poor reception that his violent, harsh novels found among the American public, both general and academic: “They don’t want to read about the blood and bones and guts of an issue,” he complained to Oney. “They want to read about something they’re not going to have to think about” (Oney 97). Even scholars of the Rough South fall prey to the temptation to rely too heavily on biography; the fact is, as Algonquin Books learned

with Larry Brown, that a sensational biographical angle is more likely to capture public attention and sell more books.¹³ Carpenter, for example, acknowledges ruefully in his introduction to *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader* that despite misgivings, he and co-editor Tom Franklin intentionally cater to this sensational biographical angle for marketing purposes:

When it comes to selling the Rough South, every proof of authenticity counts. Little wonder, then, that most critics (and, admittedly, even the editors of this anthology) tend to emphasize the more sensational aspects of the Rough South image, which is why despite all evidence to the contrary, the proto-typical Rough South writer continues to be portrayed as some kind of literary barnburner or redneck savant—a Snopes with an M.F.A. If not quite true it is nevertheless an image that publishers and publicists (not to mention the writers themselves) have done little to discourage... It is an image Grit Lit writers themselves frequently contend with and on occasion even poke fun at. (xix-xx)

Carpenter's eloquent articulation of this problem is curiously nonchalant and even defeatist; though he believes that Grit Lit is complex and that it deserves more unbiased critical attention, he ultimately succumbs to the pressure to employ stereotypes in service of "selling" the Rough South.

Well-meaning though such attempts to "sell" blue-collar literature may be, Carpenter himself admits that they have disturbing implications. Tony Early explains the

¹³For more on Algonquin's "building" Larry Brown's reputation, see Keith Perry, "Fireman-Writer, Bad Boy Novelist, King of Grit Lit: 'Building' Larry Brown(s) at Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill," *Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South*, Ed. Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008, 130-55.

result of this sensationalism: “The dark, unspoken corollary of this kind of reasoning,” he laments, “is that the production of literature is still considered, as it always has been, an exclusive province of the elite.” The implication is that without “Harry Crews: The Legend,” his fiction would be unremarkable—that what is truly noteworthy about Crews is not his writing, but his managing to write despite his underprivileged background. Literature by authors like Crews thus becomes deviant and non-normative; “high” literature is an elite privilege, the product of M.F.A. programs, while anything produced outside these parameters is uncanonical and requires explanation. This concept of Crews as savage turned savant—the son of a sharecropper who stumbled his way into the world of writing—essentializes the man and his work. In Jean Baudrillard’s terms, it exemplifies the “*precession of simulacra*”: the map precedes the territory, representation precedes the real, and the idea of Crews precedes Crews himself as “redneck” and “white trash” stereotypes start to script interactions with him (170). Our preconceived ideas about the value of formal education lead us to assume that fiction by an author without such cultural initiation will suffer—that it will be limited in some way and that scholarly acumen can expose it more easily and more exhaustively.

Interviews go a long way in dispelling the myth of Crews as a blue-collar literary clairvoyant; the extraordinary range of his reading and the depth of his insights reveal a remarkable mind behind the Mohawk. He rather enjoyed maintaining a ferocious and roguish façade, as his mother recognized and lamented: “I don’t like tattoos at all, but what can I do about it?” she commented resignedly. “Harry’s just always been such a brilliant person. He says he wants to give people something to look at, something to talk about” (Rasche 294). At the same time, Crews was also ready to strip this spectacle away

with anyone who made the effort to approach him—to get “naked,” as he called it, “naked and vulnerable to the experiences of the world” (Oney 95). “I think precisely what people mistake in me as being macho...that thing in me that wants to get as far on the edge as I can of anything that I can, the thing I like to call getting naked,” he told Oney, “is my need to keep myself going as a writer” (95). Even Crews’s Mohawk and tattoo were a deliberate expression of this need to get to the “edge,” to push boundaries and test his university colleagues’ open-mindedness: “It’s a psychological truth that before you can make a judgment about somebody else, you have to make a judgment about yourself,” he explained regarding his Mohawk. “People who can’t get past my haircut are people who have already decided what can be done with hair and what cannot be done with hair” (Rasche 293).

Crews intended to evoke similar self-judgment through his fiction, which in his words seeks to “get you turned back on yourself, and on your own code of ethics or morality or vision of the world or sense of self” (Lytal and Russell 290). The apparent directness of Crews’s novels is deceptive; though he drew heavily from his own experiences in his writings, his body of work is neither a patchwork of journal entries nor rooted predominantly in realism. Interviewers often attempt to unearth a simple autobiographical origin for the most troubling elements of his fiction: “Why is the lead character in every one of your novels an alienated male?” Tom Graves asks. “Are these characters maybe extensions of your own anger?” (141-2). Interviewers likewise attempt to find a biographical origin for the freaks in Crews’s novels: “You say in *A Childhood* that when you had infantile paralysis that you felt like a freak,” Kay Bonetti comments.

“Do you think that early experience is what attracted you to that sort of observation about the world?” (160).

Crews acknowledged autobiographical elements in his work when pressed, but he also stated unequivocally that he “despair[ed]” of the “sort of criticism that forever seeks to identify the source of fiction in the writer’s life” (Crowder 196). Though a true story inspired most of his novels, Crews’s writing is more metaphorical than realistic and the result of meticulous craftsmanship. In order to be a writer, Crews wrote, he had first to “be a reader—a close reader” (“Teaching and Writing” 11). He read voraciously and attentively; casual references to various writers littered throughout his interviews suggest that his memory bordered on photographic, and every novel contains a carefully chosen epigraph. Not only does every word count, Crews claimed, and is every word is related to every other word, but “on top of all this, these individual relationships once formed, once the key to their integrity is found, must *mean* something, must make some statement about the human condition” (8). Emphasis on this careful construction is not to imply that Crews’s work holds a single interpretive key; on the contrary, his “statement about the human condition” is often profoundly ambivalent and fraught with tension. Crews is difficult to pin down; determining the core “message” of his novels is as futile as attempting to fit Crews himself into a firm identity category. He believes that “the real genesis of books is a mystery” and that all writing “will accomplish more than one thing” (Bonetti 158, “Teaching and Writing” 11). Artists must resist the temptation to make language reductive and instead “begin with the realization that no man ever held in his hands an instrument more delicate, more complex and full of mystery than the instrument

of language” (“Creative Writing” 16). Crews’s novels do not purport to unravel the mystery of human existence; rather, they seek to problematize this mystery further.

The carefully crafted, intertextual, and ultimately enigmatic nature of Crews’s work culminates in Crews’s eighth novel, *A Feast of Snakes* (1976). The book was initially five times its length: “I wrote it all the way to the end,” Crews relates, “and I saw that I had done it wrong. I’d put it together wrong. So then I just had to go back and do it again” (Jeffrey, *Grit’s Triumph* 141). Critics concur that it is one of Crews’s best novels, but based on book reviews, it seems few readers would believe that Crews spent so much time writing and restructuring *A Feast of Snakes*. Fox implies that if it is Crews’s best work, Crews has little to give: the book concerns only a small Southern town’s “obsessive annual ritual—a rattlesnake rodeo.” Contemporary reviewers seemed to concur with Fox’s assessment: R.Z. Sheppard claimed in *Time* magazine that “as in past novels, Crews gets carried away with his own wildly fertile imagination and verbal gifts... there is too little distinction between the truly grotesque and the gratuitously bizarre.” In the *National Review*, Michael C. Brown summarily dismissed *A Feast of Snakes*: “What Mr. Crews has done,” he claimed, “is to gargantuanize every fetid nightmare non-Southerners have about the ways of their crazed brethren below the ole Mason-Dixon line.” This was the typical reaction Crews received from the general public—outraged, usually condescending accusations of sensationalism and gratuitous violence.

What reviewers and critics alike have overlooked is that in *A Feast of Snakes*, Crews concealed an intertextual code consisting of two unmistakable references to the poetry of William Blake. Given his reputation, the fact that Crews read William Blake

may seem surprising. He never mentioned William Blake in any of his published interviews, and he inserts no footnote identifying Blake as his poetic source; even Blake scholars would be hard-pressed to recognize these obscure allusions to Blake during a casual reading of *A Feast of Snakes*. But what is more shocking than Crews's knowledge of Blake is that for more than thirty years, no one noticed these references. Critics simply do not expect Harry Crews, literary outlaw, "resident weirdo," "deadeye potentate of weather-beaten wisdom and transcendental profanity," to have perused Blake's corpus—and Crews knew it (Oney 94, Michaels 247). Yet though Crews may have been loath to associate himself with academia, his reticence does not mean that he was not an avid reader and researcher; in fact, the Blakean references in *A Feast of Snakes* reveal that Crews was an active and astute, if rather secretive, scholar with a wide range of interests.

In fact, Crews probably concealed these Blakean allusions with the same "malice and forethought" with which he designed his Mohawk and tattoo, no doubt reveling in the irony that no one noticed the references to obscure poetic texts in a novel about Mystic, Georgia; the oversight only corroborated his conviction that most people were too narrow-minded to look more closely at his work than at his public image (294). Most readers only notice the tragic violence of *A Feast of Snakes*, which initially seems a fast-paced, heartbreaking, cynical inversion of the typical Bildungsroman. In the small town of Mystic, Georgia, famous for its annual rattlesnake hunts, we follow disillusioned ex-football star Joe Lon Mackey as he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his life; in the tragic conclusion, Joe Lon murders four people during the annual snake hunt and is thrown into the rattler pit by an enraged crowd. Critical analysis of *A Feast of Snakes* has focused on the novel's grotesque violence and naturalistic worldview; Jeffrey, for

example, observes that the novel illuminates Crews's "sense of contemporary man as trapped in a bizarre and fallen world. In such a world, man's cultural forces do not sustain him but rather disguise from him the truth of his condition and his reality" ("Murder and Mayhem" 53). Scott Romine similarly notes that violence, hostility and opposition structure all of Joe Lon's relationships: his world becomes a "radically determined" game, a "constrictive, suffocating space" where only one tragic outcome is possible (80-1). The most troubling aspect of Crews's particular vein of naturalism, Tim Edwards believes, is that it is not determinist in a linear sense: "The forces that shape our lives—and our deaths—are more bewilderingly complex and aloof than we can imagine" (77). The novel evokes a tragic sense of helplessness; in a society that is capable of offering no solace, contemporary humanity appears doomed to insanity or self-destructive violence.

If this exceedingly pessimistic *Weltanschauung* is indeed at the heart of *A Feast of Snakes*, it seems strangely at odds with Crews's insistence that his all of novels are profoundly moral. In characteristic Crews fashion, he explained to Oney that although most people would not believe it, he was at heart a "stomp-down hard-core moralist" (Oney 98). "I take all my books to be about the nature of faith," he stated in an early 1974 interview with Burt (89). Later in his career, he elaborated: all of his fiction after his seventh novel "was a search for faith. Or to say it another way... it's a search for the nature of belief. I am a believer and I don't think a day passes that I don't think about it, dwell upon it" (Ketchin 301). As one of his mature mid-career novels, *A Feast of Snakes* would seem to fall squarely in this category of fiction that embodies Crews's personal "search for faith"; and according to common critical analysis, Joe Lon's descent into

madness and violence does indeed represent Crews's own failed search for belief and his ultimately pessimistic worldview.

Such interpretations, while compelling, rely too heavily on the assumption that Joe Lon is an autobiographical character. Crews's protagonists are not entirely autobiographical, and his fiction does not operate on a one-to-one relation to reality; it functions through metaphor and distortion. "Many writers, and I think I'm one of them," Crews explained, "feel that they have to distort the real world in order to be able to render accurately and truly the psychological reality or emotional reality of people in this age" (Bellamy 79). The novel's themes rely on complex characterization that resists black-and-white categorizations; none of the characters is a hollow symbol. Yet critical interpretation of the novel's naturalistic *Weltanschauung* depends substantially on cursory analysis of the preacher, Victor, as a hollow symbol—a peripheral religious figure who merely personifies Southern religious fundamentalism. Critics view him as a character right out of O'Connor—perhaps fanatical, but an absolutely genuine, Old-Testament-style prophet. Jeffrey describes the preacher as "bizarre and monomaniacal" and observes that Joe Lon kills Victor because he realizes that his religion ultimately offers "no promise of salvation or even relief" ("Murder and Mayhem" 53). Ruth Brittin also believes that Victor is the "representative of organized religion" who offers Joe Lon "the possibility of a better alternative" and "insight into the meaninglessness and horror of his own life"—an offer Joe Lon rejects when in the end, Victor emerges as essentially "incomprehensible and mad" (97-8). Edward C. Lynskey proposes the only significant alternate interpretation of Victor's role: he believes that "Victor's holy calling is centered on the worship of snakes" and that by destroying him, Joe Lon displays his contempt for

a “fraudulent religion which can never defuse a society as mean as the present one” (200). Though his theory is interesting, Lynskey never articulates how precisely he reached this conclusion about Victor or how this revelation affects his interpretation of the novel. Does Victor represent all organized religion, or is he an isolated exception, a lunatic leading Joe Lon to false conclusions about the world?

Interpretation of the novel thus hinges largely on Victor and what he represents. How do we interpret his death at Joe Lon’s hands? Is Joe Lon the hero and Victor the victim, or vice versa? This question remains unsatisfactorily answered to date because Victor’s lines have received little attention. Critics assume that Victor’s occasional religious outbursts are negligible and characterized solely by what Allen Shepherd dubs “Old Testament gibberish”; Michael Spikes, who analyzes Victor’s role at length, claims that “little bit we hear” of the preacher’s message “is cast in a mystical rhetoric” (419, 160). In fact, Victor quotes the Bible only twice during the four times he speaks. The preacher’s other source is not biblical, but poetic: he quotes two of Blake’s lesser-known narrative poems, *Tiriell* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Great Albion*, word-for-word. *Tiriell* and *Jerusalem* span Blake’s poetic career: *Tiriell* (1789) is one of his earliest works, and *Jerusalem* (1804) is his last and longest. The implication is that Crews read Blake extensively, thoroughly, and with extraordinary insight—a feat that is all the more remarkable considering the complexity of Blake’s philosophy and religious views and the relative obscurity of *Tiriell* and *Jerusalem*.

This knowledge complicates our understanding of Crews’s novel and suggests that analysis through an intertextual framework may be more enlightening than an autobiographical one. Crews’s Blakean allusions are decidedly pertinent to the novel’s

thematic concerns, as is the book's epigraph—the first verse of Richard Eberhart's "If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness":

If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness
When everything is as it was in my childhood
Violent, vivid, and of infinite possibility:
That the sun and moon broke over my head.

Then I cast time out of the trees and fields,
Then I stood immaculate in the Ego;
Then I eyed the world with all delight,
Reality was the perfection of my sight.

And time has big handles on the hands,
Fields and trees a way of being themselves.
I saw battalions of the race of mankind
Standing stolid, demanding a moral answer.

I gave the moral answer and I died
And into a realm of complexity came
Where nothing is possible but necessity
And the truth waiting there like a red babe.

The poem contrasts the vivid and violent delight of childhood with the moral responsibilities of adulthood, echoing Joe Lon's sense of displacement after graduating

from Old Mystic High, as well as William Blake's division of human life into separate phases of innocence and experience. Joe Lon's life used to amount to no more than a game of football—a heady and fleeting four years of high school, game nights, cheerleaders, sex, booze, drugs, and no consequences. “Trying to decide what to do with the night,” he reflects while sitting behind the counter from which he now sells beer and bootleg liquor, “was the only decision there was once upon a time” (27). His time as “Boss Snake of the Mystic Rattlers” was hardly marked by innocence; he was trained to be no more than a machine with muscles that ticked automatically and a brain hardwired to inflict pain. Society warped Joe Lon's childhood into an inverted period of innocence: Mystic citizens loved “tall, blond, high school All-American” Joe Lon Mackey despite his lust for violence, teachers ignored his poor grades and allowed him to pass high school without learning to read or write, and teammates merely sipped beer and watched while he committed murder (6).

Yet violent though this period was, it was also somehow “vivid” and full of “infinite possibility.” Life as Boss Snake was vibrant, warmed by pure physical sensation and carnal joy that approach a “pitch that is near madness”—a phase that Eberhart believed was desirable. “It's good to be at the pitch that is near madness,” he clarifies. “That's when you are nearest to the divine insight” (Donoghue 21). All of Mystic's youth pass through a similar phase that seems both corrupted and innocent at the same time; Hard Candy, for example, reaches a state of emotional and physical rapture while performing a cheer routine for the Mystic Rattlers: “She felt the snake between her breasts, felt him there, and loved him there, coiled, the deep tumescent S held rigid, ready to strike.... She liked the sweat, liked the way it felt, slick as oil, in all the joints of her

body, her bones, in the firm sliding muscles, tensed and locked now, ready to spring—to *strike*” (3). Though in one sense her identification with the snake seems repugnant, in another sense her ecstasy appears almost innocent in its pure, animalistic physicality: she is one with the snake, she *is* a snake, ready to “*strike*” like the snake on her breast.

Mystic’s youth seem to live in the Lacanian mirror phase throughout high school, “immaculate in the Ego” in that they identify intimately with the reality. Berenice and Joe Lon experience a similar sensation while having sex on the “hard-packed moon-colored dirt” of the empty snake pit, bringing to life the crazed, moonlit first verse of Eberhart’s poem: Joe Lon’s “moon-struck hair splay[s] from his head” as Berenice writhes and murmurs, “I’m freezing full of snakes. All in my blood. Crawling through my heart” (30-1). He gazes at her, the “moonlight splintering against his back,” and remembers that she “was always doing crazy shit and saying crazy shit, and sometimes it scared him” (31). They are at the “pitch near madness,” at a point close to insanity, where the sun and moon break over their heads in a moment of violent transcendence that resonates more with Blake’s notion of liberating excess. “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,” Blake states in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Katey Castellano explains that the Blakean concept of excess involves “delighting in the God-like forces of fecundity and death” (10). Relationship with the divine is only possible through excess, “both prolific and devouring,” since “human relationship with God involves emanating energy that is always overflowing in a world understood through the spiritual sense” (Castellano 10). This is not to say that in the snake pit, Berenice and Joe Lon have achieved the final, consummate relationship with God that Blake envisions as the ultimate human goal; however, this particular sexual encounter is not “bestial” in the

negative sense that Edwards implies; their sensual elation contains an element of joy and a degree of unity that Blake and Eberhart might deem divinely inspired (69). Though it contains a hint of madness, it also seems almost naïvely blissful; Joe Lon recalls this episode as a wonderful dream, a stage in his childhood he wishes he could recapture. He and Berenice were young then, inexperienced, uneducated, apparently unencumbered by conscience or a sense of morality, willing to take life in all its violence at face value and to live day by day in the same way as the snakes with which they shared their hometown.

Being on the Mystic Rattlers and participating in Mystic's annual rattlesnake roundup used to give Joe Lon's life meaning; now, he finds himself in a new and ugly world that baffles and disgusts him. The way he abuses his wife now makes him "sick with shame"—a novel and unpleasant feeling that violence never occasioned when he was in high school (11). The first part of the novel traces Joe Lon's struggle to accept his new life resignedly: "*That's all right,*" he tells himself desperately ten times a day; "*By God, I had mine....* What the hell, all things had to end, both good and bad" (7-8). The words ring insincere even as he utters them. It becomes increasingly clear throughout Part One of the novel that Joe Lon still thinks he can reclaim his old life and revert to a stage of relative innocence: "He somehow managed to get what he wished was true confused with the facts of his own life... It was a little quirk his head had of working when he was lost in the sour mist of bourbon whiskey"—a mist he frequents daily (55). His only coping mechanism is to blur memories with reality, hoping that one day he will wake up to find that life has lost its baffling new complexity. He has transitioned into Blake's stage of experience from which there is no return, a "realm of complexity" that "demands a moral answer," and he is simply unequipped to give it ("If I Could Only Live" 13, 14).

The first part of the novel ends with Victor's appearance. Current football team leader Willard Miller and Joe Lon find the preacher sitting outside his trailer, and Willard stops to thrust his face close to Victor's and insult him with whiskey-laden breath. "He ain't nothing but a snake fucker," Willard yells, and Victor raises eyes burning with an angry intensity "like he knew something other people didn't know, and whatever it was he knew was too terrible to say" (76). Joe Lon begs Willard to leave the preacher alone, stammering, "He... he... Willard, he *believes* all that stuff about the snake and God" (76). In the face of Victor's fiery gaze and all-consuming religious commitment, Joe Lon suddenly realizes the newfound emptiness of his own existence: "What did he, Joe Lon, do? What did he have? He had once had football to fill up his mind and his body and his days and so he had never thought about it. Then one day football was gone and it took everything with it... His life had become a not very interesting movie that he seemed condemned to see over and over again" (102). Without quite realizing it, Joe Lon suddenly bears the weight of the terrible secret conveyed by Victor's next words: "The great dragon was cast out. The old serpent called the devil and satan which deceiveth the whole world. He was cast out into the earth and his angels were cast out with him"—a quotation from Revelation 12:9 (76). Through Victor, Joe Lon grasps the utterly corrupted nature of his new world and realizes that there is no returning from the realm of experience.

Victor's later words to Lottie Mae further expose the repulsiveness of this new realm in a poetic rather than biblical context. After being raped by Buddy Matlow, Lottie Mae sees and feels snakes all around her: "Went to sleep with me, snake did," she tells Joe Lon's mentally unbalanced little sister Beeder. "Woke up with me. Eat my food.

Come in the front door with me, went out the back. Wore my skin like clothes” (132). The significance of the pervasive serpentine imagery becomes fraught, no longer associated with the stage of comparative innocence. Lottie Mae’s experience is entirely unlike Berenice’s or Hard Candy’s ecstatic oneness with snakes; Victor’s words clarify the nature of this difference: ““Snakes, not sons, wreathing around the bones of Tiriell!”” he roars at Lottie Mae as she walks through the forest attempting to avoid the snakes in her path (124). Tiriell is not an Old Testament prophet, but the titular character of the first of Blake’s prophetic books, *Tiriell*; Crews lifts Victor’s words to Lottie Mae directly from line 21 of Blake’s poem: ““Serpents, not sons, wreathing around the bones of Tiriell!””

Tiriell offers an appalling, gruesome glimpse into Blake’s vision of the phase of experience—a stage in which the subject is isolated, despairing and helpless. In *Tiriell*, Laura Quinney explains, “Blake portrays the unhappiness of the subject who has internalized the empiricist view of human nature and its subordination to material reality” (27). From his father, Tiriell inherits a negative worldview in which the only mode of living involves survival through domination, slaughter and “consuming” (389). Tiriell, like his father before him, initially ruled the Western Lands as a tyrant and enslaved his own children; he has since been brought low by a rebellion, and the poem commences with an aged, bald, blind and decrepit Tiriell returning from exile. Bearing his dying wife in his now feeble arms, Tiriell reaches the gates of the family palace from which he has been banished and calls upon his children to witness their mother’s death. When they refuse to help their tyrant father bury his wife, he stoops to dig a grave with his own hands, exclaiming ““Serpents, not sons, wreathing around the bones of Tiriell! / Ye worms of death, feasting upon your aged parent’s flesh!”” (21-22). This likening of humanity to

serpents signifies not a transcendent, imaginary unity with reality, but the fall into experience, adulthood and moral evil. Nothing is innocent in Lottie Mae's, Joe Lon's or Tiriél's worlds; the snake is now a harbinger of evil, and it is everywhere. Serpentine imagery and references to feasting recur throughout *Tiriél* as he proceeds to wander his kingdom in exile, and the conclusion of the poem finds Tiriél stretched at his father's feet, gasping out one final speech that condemns his father and likens all mankind to voracious serpents trapped in a meaningless existence: humanity is "bound beneath the heavens in a reptile form," he mourns, a mere "worm of sixty winters creeping on the dusky ground" (335-6).

The parallels between Blake's poem and *A Feast of Snakes* are arresting. As Jeffrey puts it, "Lucifer and his angels seem to have lighted not merely on earth but, more specifically, in Mystic, Georgia," and the same could be said of Tiriél's mythical kingdom (48). The beginning of Crews's novel finds Joe Lon locked out of the palace of his youth much like Blake's king: lost and past his prime, he lurks under the bleachers drinking and watching Hard Candy on the cheer team, fantasizing about her older sister in an attempt to relive the days when he had been Boss Snake of the Mystic High Rattlers (7). His inadequate education renders Joe Lon entirely incapable of making a smooth transition into adult life, though his football training is not solely to blame; the root of his current predicament lies as much in his upbringing by his father as in subsequent social conditioning. The last lines of *Tiriél* illuminate the troubled nature of both Tiriél's and Joe Lon's paternal relationships: at the end of the poem, Tiriél calls Har the "Mistaken father of a lawless race" and accuses him of imposing the same law on both the "lion and the patient Ox," of forcing his son to become "as a serpent in a paradise / Consuming all

both flowers and fruits insects and warbling birds” (357, 360, 388-9). Immediately after the child emerges from the womb, Tiriél mourns, the father cuts it off from its mother and “forms a whip to rouze the sluggish senses to act / And scourges off all youthful fancies from the newborn man,” thrusting it violently into the realm of experience and corruption (392, 380-1). Tiriél could never escape this bitter world and the “poison all around him”; he can only repeat his father’s mistakes and die cursing him (385).

Reading *Tiriél* alongside *A Feast of Snakes* helps illuminate the source of Joe Lon’s existential crisis and provides a more insightful context for understanding the novel than literary naturalism. The forces determining Joe Lon’s life are not “bewilderingly complex and aloof,” as Edwards contends; on the contrary, their source is shockingly unambiguous, though no less destructive for its specificity: namely, Big Joe (77). Big Joe is as dark an influence on his family as Tiriél’s father; he causes his wife’s suicide, triggers his daughter’s mental breakdown, and teaches his son to be as violent and brutal as himself. Joe Lon initially believes that Beeder’s going “nuts” and the death of his own football career were accidents that “had just happened. Nobody knew why or apparently would ever know” (48-9). During the second half of the story, however—after Victor’s revelation that the serpent, Satan, rules the material world—we discover that Beeder’s mental collapse was no accident. Her breakdown occurred when she came home from cheerleading practice to find her mother dead in a rocking chair, suffocated by a plastic bag knotted around her head with one of her husband’s ties. Earlier that day, Big Joe had dragged his wife away from the man she had left him for and brought her back home with him. The note pinned to her still chest read, “*Bring me back now you son of a bitch*”

(120). “Beeder,” Joe Lon recalls, “had never been the same since,” and though he scarcely realizes it, neither had he (120).

Big Joe treats his family as badly as he treats the prize bulldogs he breeds for fighting (45). All are named Tuffy—he gives the same law and even the same name to the lion and the ox, to dogs and humans—and he raises them solely to kill each other and bear as much physical pain as possible, tying them to a treadmill every day until they nearly die of exhaustion. For Joe Lon and his little sister, the drone of their father’s treadmill replaces the hum of Har’s whip. Beeder cannot shut it out, no matter how loud she keeps the television volume; beneath everything, the threatening sound of the treadmill pulsates insistently with a “ragged thumping like the beating of an enormous erratic heart” that she cannot escape (133). The sound will never stop: “He’ll tie another one on it before he’s through,” Beeder whispers to Lottie Mae, who responds, “*Before he’s through, he gone tie everone on it*” (133). Lottie Mae, Beeder and Victor all know the same terrible secret that long eludes Joe Lon: that Big Joe has already tied him on it.

Joe Lon has followed as blindly in his father’s footsteps as did Tiriell; he runs the same bootleg liquor store his father ran for twenty years and he finds himself beating his wife and treating her “like a dog” despite his efforts to stop himself (12). In fact, Joe Lon treats his wife like his father treats him: “Joe Lon,” he roars when his son cannot bring him a bottle of whiskey from the store, “I’m gone have to shoot you with a gun some day” (17-18). Big Joe, not Victor, inspires his son’s most heartrending breakdown when Joe Lon finally realizes he no longer admires and loves his father as he did in his childhood (40). Sobbing and screaming, Joe Lon calls his father from the store phone to share his tragic realization that he has become as depraved as his father, and his

condemnation rings out like Tiriél's final paternal curse: "A family reunion! Right. All together again... you git Mama and Beeder and I'll get Elf and the babies and you and me'll git'm all in the big house and we'll just beat the shit out of them.... We like that, don't we? Me and you?" (150-1).

If anyone in *A Feast of Snakes* represents the failure of organized religion, it is Big Joe, who is a deacon in "The Church of Jesus Christ With Signs Following" and is "forever trying to get Joe Lon to start going" (45). His son refuses; perhaps unconsciously, he knows that a church in which Big Joe Mackey is a deacon cannot offer any hope of salvation. "God knows I been tried," his father complains loudly to him, "I been tried severely and I ain't been found wanting" (45). Without knowing why, Joe Lon immediately feels his mood shift to "something sour and mean... like a load on a truck might shift, suddenly and with great force" (45). He knows that if Big Joe were truly tried under divine law, he would indeed be found wanting—more wanting than most of Mystic. The representative of organized religion in *A Feast of Snakes* is thus worse than "incomprehensible and mad," as Brittin suggests; he is vicious and tyrannical (98). Crews's comments about Southern Baptists accurately, even euphemistically, describe Big Joe's worldview: "The fact [is] that they are mean in the sense of being small, their angle of vision—what they admit into their society, into their lives, into their emotions, into their charity, is very small," he states. "Southern Baptists worship the God of wrath, the God that gives to schemers, the God that benefits the strong and lets them walk on the weak" (Graves 139-40).

Survival through dominance is the law of Big Joe's world and of Har's; Big Joe abuses Tuffy and his children because violence is the only survival mechanism he knows.

He tries to justify his treatment of his dogs: “They weren’t men; they didn’t think; they fought,” he tells himself (96). In the end, though, his life differs little from those of the bulldogs he raises, and he even subconsciously identifies with Tuffy: Joe Lon notices that his father and Tuffy seem almost like partners as he “watche[s] them limp, the old man and the bloodied dog, across the wide bare yard” (52). Beeder and Joe Lon have internalized their father’s viewpoint too well—Joe Lon as one of the strong, and Beeder as one of the weak. She wallows in her own excrement and even puts it in her hair while Joe Lon beats his wife, treats her like his father treats Tuffy, and hates himself for it.

The only character in *A Feast of Snakes* who seems to have transcended the serpentine world is Victor, though his role seems profoundly ambiguous. Joe Lon’s relationship to the preacher cannot merely represent Crews’s personal tension with the fundamentalist Southern Protestant church, as Brittin believes; Victor’s Blakean sources confirm that he serves as more than Crews’s straw man for organized religion. Victor is more an isolated zealot than a member of an established church, and Crews actually had great sympathy and respect for such people who took their faith so seriously, “bizarre” though they may seem:

They have compressed and boiled down the religious experience to something that is hard and fast and simple in the best sense of the word.... I leave to minds better than mine to judge them. If you’re a snake handler and you pick up snakes in a religious ecstasy and the snakes do not bite you because you are a believer, or nine of them bite you and you do not die because you are a believer, who am I, Harry Crews, to say that that is

some kind of a charlatan, false, phony, accidental happenstance? I'm not prepared to say that and never will be. (Ketchin 304)

The fervor of a snake-handler's belief may seem incomprehensible to Crews, but he does not deem it insane; in fact, he sees it as hyper-rational, not contrary to reason or ordinary belief, but beyond them. In a way, Victor falls into this category of believers: he appears to wear a serpentine headdress, his white hair "full and twisted in tight coils all over his head and down his neck," and Joe Lon describes him as "speckled as a guinea hen from rattlesnake bites" (76). Joe Lon's words echo those of Pastor George Went Hensley, historical founder of the snake-handling movement: "Been bit over four hundred times 'till I'm speckled all over like a guinea-hen" (qtd. in Kimbrough 111). The parallel between Victor and Hensley is clear, but it seems to end with snake-handling. Though he is a member of a snake-handling church, Victor is clearly not a religious fundamentalist; his beliefs seem only partially based on the Bible, and he presents Blake's poetry as though it were Scripture; furthermore, Victor's message of salvation comes not from the Bible, but from Blake's *Jerusalem*.

Jerusalem is infamously enigmatic—Robert N. Essick begins his discussion of the poem by asking a not entirely rhetorical question: "Is *Jerusalem* unreadable?... The closer we come to the poem's walls of words, the less clear our vision" (251). Part of *Jerusalem* constitutes what Essick calls an "excursion into the horrific sublime," possibly even "the most violent, blood- and entrails-splattered poem in English" (261); Harold Bloom similarly characterizes the poem as a "cosmic survey of the fallen condition" given mostly to depiction of a "delusive nightmare-world" (365-366). In this light, Crews's reference to *Jerusalem* seems relevant as a parallel to *Tiriell*'s vision—a nearly

apocalyptic narrative that mirrors the world of *A Feast of Snakes*. A howl of despair echoes throughout all three narratives: in *Tiriell*, the king turns his own daughter's hair to a head full of serpents and condemns her to "howl in the desolate mountains" (*T* 326); in *Jerusalem*, Los's entrance into a fallen world leaves him "howling in pain" as his selfhood is divided (*J* 6.5); and in *A Feast of Snakes*, Joe Lon repeatedly "howls" in a way that "made him look just like he'd been crying, made his eyes red and his nose red and his face flushed" (*FS* 13).¹⁴

The portion of *Jerusalem* that Victor quotes, however, does not pertain to the tyranny of the serpent over earth. At the dogfight, the prelude to the rattlesnake roundup the next day, the preacher offers a moment of divine insight:

Victor raised his arms and his voice boomed into the pit: "I heard Jehovah speak terrific from his holy place and saw the words of the mutual covenants divine chariots of gold and jewels with living creatures starry and flaming with every color lion tiger horse elephant eagle dove fly worm and the wondrous *serpent* . . ."

Joe Lon started to howl. He let his head drop back on his shoulders and howled directly into the blue sunless sky.

". . . clothed in gems and rich array human in the forgiveness of sins according to the covenant of Jehovah." (159)

The preacher quotes nearly verbatim from Blake's poem:

And I heard Jehovah speak

¹⁴Blake's *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Great Albion* consists of 100 illuminated plates; quotations from the poem are cited by plate number followed by line number.

Terrific from his Holy Place & saw the Words of the Mutual Covenant
Divine

On Chariots of gold & jewels, with Living Creatures starry & flaming
With every Colour, Lion, Tyger, Horse, Elephant, Eagle Dove, Fly,
Worm,

And the all wondrous Serpent clothed in gems & rich array Humanize
In the Forgiveness of Sins according to the Covenant of Jehovah. (98.39-
45)

In Blake's vision, all life forms finally become one; all animals, including the serpent, are humanized in a new world of resplendent glory. This sublime unity constitutes for Blake a third state of human existence that is a "synthesis" of the first two phases and only possible after passing through necessary pain of experience (Damon 197). In *Jerusalem's* final scene, Suzanne Sklar explains, the false dualism created by materialism vanishes: "Elemental forgiveness obliterates good and evil righteousness and sin.... Jerusalem's forgiveness recreates individuals, societies, and the cosmos. Even tree, metal, earth, and 'the all wondrous Serpent' rejoice in the Divine Body in Jerusalem's name (J98-9). No one is excluded" (93). The preacher thus emerges as neither a fundamentalist nor a fanatic, but a sort of poet-prophet, even a Blake figure—perhaps uncanny and enigmatic, but divinely inspired. If Victor represents any personal aspect of Crews's life, it may Crews's conviction that "if I ever come to the place where *I* ought to be, and I don't think I'm there yet, I think I'll come there through fiction because that's my work and that's my search" (Ketchin 304-5). Perhaps the poetically inflected nature of Victor's religious message serves both to complicate his role and reaffirm Crews's belief in the potency of

literature. Victor's words indicate that he experiences direct communication with the divine and that he is able to offer Mystic peace and forgiveness, to embrace its citizens and serpents in his vision of transcendent unity and compassion: "I want you snakes!" he cries, "I want *all* you snakes!" (160).

Why, then, does Joe Lon respond to Victor's announcement of salvation by howling and fainting? Why does the novel end with his body in a snake pit? In the end, it seems that Joe Lon is simply as incapable as Tiriell of transcending the tyranny of materialistic violence; as Crews put it, Joe Lon and Marvin Molar of *The Gypsy's Curse* "have both been trained throughout their lives to do something they thought would save them. And then they had the rug jerked out from under them.... He was supposed to run over other boys, which he did with great efficiency. And then it came up all of a sudden that he wasn't able to go to college, and he had been trained for violence.... Then it was all ended" (Graves 142). Even Beeder, weak and pallid in the light of her TV, can only conceive of resistance to her father's reign in terms of violence. The only way out, she thinks, is through death—her own death or Tuffy's, since she cannot fathom killing her father. When Lottie Mae describes her serpentine dilemma, Beeder knows only one way out:

"You in trouble," said Beeder. "Bad trouble. It's one thing I can tell you though. Can you shoot a gun?"

"Cain't shoot no gun. Ain't got no gun."

"Knife?" asked Beeder Mackey.

"Razor," said Lottie Mae.

Beeder said: "Don't be without you razor."

“I couldn’t kill it,” said Lottie Mae.

“Just in case you can, be handy to you razor.” (71)

Joe Lon hears the same message at the Blue Pines, where a line from James Brown’s song “The Payback” blares in the background: “I don’t know karate but I know kaRAZOR” (105). Both Blake and Crews believed that violence is natural and can be liberating; according to Blake, the overthrow of tyrannical human laws was only possible through revolution. In *A Feast of Snakes*, salvation through the razor seems to work for Lottie Mae: she cuts Buddy’s “snake” off and escapes physically unscathed. The result, however, is Buddy’s gruesome death that shakes all of Mystic, and Lottie Mae seems to have become as mentally incapacitated as Beeder: as Joe Lon dies, he has a vision of “Beeder in her dirty white nightgown squatting off on the side of the hill with Lottie Mae, watching” (177). *Jerusalem* ultimately condemns salvation by the sword: though at first Los responds to “violence and oppression with a spiritual sword (as in Ephesians 6.17),” Sklar relates, he “continually contends with the shadowy part of himself” (156-7). In the final scene, “the notion of vengeance is finally annihilated. Serpents may be dangerous, but they can be redeemed” (Sklar 79).

A Feast of Snakes offers only a glimpse of this final redemption through Victor; Joe Lon cannot comprehend the possibility of such redemption. But to attribute Joe Lon’s actions in the final scene to Crews’s own determinist or naturalistic worldview would be too simple; the context of *A Feast of Snakes* is more parabolic and intertextual than autobiographical. Neither *Tiriel* nor *A Feast of Snakes* is intended to present either a complete picture of human existence or even a literal representation of a fragment of it; they are poetic attempts to capture a subjective experience of what Blake and Crews

agree is a violent and materialistic world, though Crews may not have shared Blake's ultimate optimism about that world. Crews repeatedly maintained that his fiction depicts the darker side of human nature; it offers not a cohesive account of human existence, but a warped glimpse into one facet of the human condition. "It is more fascinating, perhaps easier to write about that which is diabolical and evil," Crews averred. "It fascinates us with ourselves much more, the animal in us, the flesh-tearing, brutal animal in us, fascinates us" (Jeffrey and Noble 111).

This cruel side of himself is precisely what Joe Lon recognizes at the end of the novel and mistakes as constituting his entire being: "Watching Victor stagger across the crest of the ridge, Joe Lon knew what it was he had planned to do all along, the thing that had lain rank and fascinating in his brain since last night at the pit" (176). As Victor raises his voice to preach about "good and evil," it sounds like a "mad howl" in Joe Lon's ears; he reaches for his shotgun and blows a "hole the size of a doorknob out of Victor's pale naked chest" (176). Crews deferred to one of his literary idols to explain his preoccupation with human evil: "Greene always insisted upon the right to portray the unbeliever as powerfully as the believer.... What most people want, out there in the suburbs, is a papier-mâché villain. A guy really powerful and really bad at the same time scares them. The devil in Milton's *Paradise Lost* came out heroic, saying it was better to rule in hell" (Burt 89). Crews's fiction often centers on the villain—so convincingly that the villain does indeed emerge apparently as heroic as Milton's Satan. It is a testament to Crews's skill that Joe Lon is as much a victim as villain; but in the final scene, he is less an everyman figure than a Tiriell-like antihero—a tragic representation of humanity's potential for corruption and despair.

We can extend the similarities between Crews and Blake further than their fiction: Blake, too, has an uneasy reception history that in many ways mirrors Crews's. Alan Richardson observes that "Blake was known in his time primarily as an artist and engraver, but he had no great reputation and was highly regarded only by a few. As a poet he was virtually unknown"—an oversight due in large part to Blake's lower-class status (28). Only later did Blake gain fame; T.S. Eliot, critical though he was of Blake's philosophy and religion, defended Blake's poetic achievement with a statement that we might apply just as well to Crews: "It is impossible to regard him as a naïf, a wild man, a wild pet for the supercultivated.... [His] is an honesty against which the whole world conspires, because it is unpleasant" (88). "Harry Crews: The Legend" functions in Crews's written work much as his Mohawk functioned in his personal life: as a distraction from his less-recognized, intensely serious side—a dare to read his fiction on its own terms, apart from his public image, and thereby to confront our own assumptions and prejudices. Crews may have preferred to reside on the fringes of scholarly social circles, but he was also an academic who read widely, wrote profusely, and, as Bledsoe relates, regularly attended departmental meetings. "By the way," Bledsoe notes, Crews's books "weigh in at over twenty-four pounds" on the scale he demanded in the middle of a departmental debate—twenty-four pounds that probably would have easily won him his bet with his colleagues, though no one took him up on his offer to compare their work by the pound (*Perspectives* xiv). Even putting only *A Feast of Snakes* on the scale exposes Crews not only as one of the twentieth century's most multifaceted Southern novelists, but also as an astute and eclectic, though surreptitious, scholar.

Chapter Two

Peering “Over the Edge”: Social Realism in Larry Brown’s *Joe*

Despite Larry Brown’s national acclaim from reviewers, critics and contemporary writers, New Southern Studies has been slow to recognize him as one of prominent voices in contemporary Southern literature. Jean W. Cash relates that *Joe* (1991), perhaps Brown’s best novel, received more than one hundred reviews, “held a place on virtually every reviewer’s list of the best books of the year,” won the Southern Book Critics’ Circle fiction award, made the American Library Association’s twelve best books of the year list in 1991, and was a top ten nominee for the National Book Award (*A Writer’s Life* 125). Daniel Woodrell, author of *Winter’s Bone*, deemed *Joe* “brilliant,” claiming that “Larry Brown has slapped his own fresh tattoo on the big right arm of Southern Lit,” and David L. Ulin of the *Los Angeles Times* saw the titular character as an “icon of the new South” (qtd. in Cash *A Writer’s Life* 126). Fellow Southern novelist Rick Bass called Larry Brown’s *Joe* “the second Great American Novel” in the tradition of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, and in a prepublication brochure solicited for Brown’s novel, eminent literary critic Cleanth Brooks proclaimed the book a “very fine piece of fiction” whose story is “fully told” and “significant” (xi, 2, 4).

Joe’s widespread early success contrasts sharply with Brown’s relative anonymity in current academia. Scholarship on his work is scarce: Cash’s biography, a single collection of essays, and a handful of other articles comprise the extent of literary

criticism on Brown.¹⁵ The critics who acknowledge his importance and that of the Rough South movement in general tread in mostly uncharted territory and debate how best to interpret Brown's work and its place in the Southern literary tradition. Matthew Guinn argues that Southern studies needs to develop an entirely new mode of criticism for authors like Brown, since critics raised on the milk of Southern tradition often resort to the ineffective and outdated method of tracing connections between Brown and the "constellation of southern modernist giants" (37).

Guinn is no doubt correct in calling for a shift in critical perspective; but his proposal that we read Brown as a new literary naturalist is as backward-looking a solution as the one he decries, especially for *Joe*. Robert Donahoo argues for a unique approach to Brown's fiction that requires attention to reader involvement, or what Wolfgang Iser calls the "virtual dimension" of the text (19). Donahoo's proposal sounds promising, but his reading of *Dirty Work* ends with a disappointing conclusion:

¹⁵See Jean W. Cash, *Larry Brown: A Writer's Life*, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011; and *Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South*, ed. Cash and Keith Perry, Jackson: UP of Mississippi. Other essays on Larry Brown include Cash, "Evangelical Fervor, Gothic Horror, and Redemption: Reflections of Flannery O'Connor in Larry Brown's Fiction," *Flannery O'Connor Review* 1 (2001): 37-48; Matthew Guinn, "The New Naturalism of Larry Brown," *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000, 35-56; Paul Lyons, "Larry Brown's *Joe* and the Uses and Abuses of the 'Region' Concept," *South to a New Place: Region, Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002, 96-118; Verbie Prevost, "Larry Brown's *Dirty Work*: A Study of Man's Responsibility for Suffering," *Tennessee Philological Bulletin: Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Tennessee Philological Association* 30 (1993): 21-7; Christopher Rieger, "The Pickup Truck in the Garden: Larry Brown's *Joe*," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 63.3-4 (2010): 679-94; and John A. Staunton, "Shadowing Grace in the Post-Southern South: 'A Roadside Resurrection' and Larry Brown's Narratives of Witness," *Religion & Literature* 33.1 (2001): 43-74.

Brown's novel guides them [readers] to imagine themselves into Southern history.... In other words, instead of rejecting the traditional paradigms of Southern literature, *Dirty Work* broadens the spectrum of Southern society included within them. Readers, as a result—whether Southerners or others, day laborers or aristocrats, black or white—come to know and share the burden of the South's ironic past. (34-5)

What Donahoo fails to see is that Brown's characters do not share the burden of the Southern past that haunts their predecessors. If anything, Brown implicitly rewrites the Southern past from a different perspective: that of the Southern poor white. Many of his characters, like Gary Jones in *Joe*, cannot read and do not even know their birth dates; they do not know enough about their ancestors to feel burdened by them or by the mythic Southern past.

Brown, in fact, almost directly defies obsolete, backward-looking readings of his work. In *Joe*, Civil War enthusiast John Coleman deteriorates slowly amidst his war lore in the stagnant back room of his gas station store, surrounded by “endless newspapers and magazines and Civil war books” instead of offspring, desperate for children whom he “so badly desired to sire,” yet cursed with sterility (172, 235). Similarly, the only Civil War memorial Brown mentions is outmoded and irrelevant to the more pressing problems surrounding it: “The stained marble soldier raised in tribute to a long dead and vanquished army went on with his charge, the tip of his bayonet broken off by tree pruners, his epaulets covered with pigeon droppings” (138-9). Meanwhile, the poor and downtrodden members of society mill about beneath the statue, as forgotten and ignored as the long dead army. Brown's depiction of the contemporary South is more than a

postmodern reimagining of the past; it is a deep moral engagement with immediate, realistic social problems that most readers would rather not acknowledge. Brown learned this lesson about his audience during his long apprenticeship as a writer:

I learned the hardest lesson of all, that you can get to the point where you're writing publishable fiction and still have it rejected for other reasons. It wasn't being rejected because the story wasn't good, it was being rejected because it hurt people too bad to read it. Because it was too honest. And too brutal, some say. And the only way I can really defend myself against any of that is to say, "Well, yeah it's brutal, but I think that it's honest." And what I think you've got to do is share this experience with people. That's what I'm writing about. (qtd. in Manley 77)

The poetic cadence of Brown's narratives does not disguise the difficult truth that his fiction is at all times an authentic representation of the contemporary rural South—a part of society that most readers would rather ignore.

Considering the central role of honesty in Brown's storytelling, what Dorie LaRue calls "social realism" perhaps best describes his fiction (52). Brown foregrounds immediate, real social and ethical issues by welding realism and lyricism, creating what Darlin' Neal calls a mix of "representation and realism" that strives to create an "intimate sense of experience" (16). It would be grossly inaccurate, however, to dub Brown a protest novelist; as Cash observes, all of Brown's writing springs from the urge to tell a compelling story rather than from a nebulous desire to address social injustices: he and his "idol" Flannery O'Connor both believe that "drawing readers into compelling narratives must precede any attempt to teach or preach" (Cash, "Evangelical Fervor" 47).

Though he is far from didactic, the fact that Brown's stories have real-world counterparts demands a response that extends beyond the aesthetic, making Donahoo's reader-centered model to some extent appropriate. Donahoo astutely observes that Brown poses ethical questions to the reader, though he claims that Brown does so without requiring a "moral or immoral response," content to "create an experience" rather than "state an idea" (32). Nothing could be further from the truth. Donahoo's assertion is a tribute to Brown's masterful ability to pull readers into a story, but the situation into which Brown draws his reader is always fraught with ethical dilemmas that demand a moral response both from his characters, and in turn, from the reader. Brown's subject matter is always both utterly realistic and eminently ethical, exposing deep rifts in the current social structure with brutal realism and a profoundly moral worldview.

The ethical dimension of Brown's work is vital to the way in which he addresses the issue of poverty in particular. The poor whites in Brown's fiction are not the two-dimensional caricatures that for so long populated the pages of *Southern Literature* as "comic, villain or victim," in the words of Erik Bledsoe (70). Instead, Brown offers a fully-dimensional and empathetic view of poor whites from a within-class perspective based on his personal experience as a working-class Southerner. He represents the plight of poor Southerners not by idealizing them or victimizing them, but by depicting them simply as human beings undergoing extraordinary suffering. Whether in the poverty-stricken South or anywhere else in the world, what ultimately unites humanity in Brown's eyes is what Richard Gaughran recognizes as the central theme of *The Rabbit Factory*: "the basic human desire for connection" (100). Brown maintains that humans are happiest when they achieve meaningful relationships and assume moral responsibility for

each other, and his fiction is most shocking when it shows where society has failed in this regard. By portraying the lives of Southerners so low on the social ladder that they have fallen through the cracks, Brown identifies one of society's most profound ethical failures: namely, its treatment of the poor. It is all too easy to fall back on the familiar burden of Southern history, and in doing so to assume that the South's guilt dwells solely in the past; Brown forces us to confront the fact that social injustices persist and are all too often overlooked.

In *Joe*, the drama of human accountability plays out in a particularly tragic and complex fashion that illustrates Brown's fundamental belief in humanity's shared moral responsibility for each other. Against the backdrop of a beautiful but harsh and unforgiving landscape, readers witness Gary Jones, his mother, and his two sisters writhe at the mercy of the elements and the hand of their abusive, alcoholic father. The Joneses are nomads living at a level of poverty probably unimaginable for most readers; they wander from town to town without shelter and often without meals as Wade squanders any money they make on alcohol. Wade shows neither a sense of moral boundaries nor a sense of paternal duty; he will do anything for money or liquor. Years before the start of the story, he sold his youngest son for the price of a lavish automobile and his wife's sanity. At the end of the novel, he lets local reprobates rape his youngest, mute daughter for thirty dollars apiece. The Joneses' only hope lies in Gary, and Gary's only hope appears to lie in Joe Ransom.

At first, the conflict between the antagonist and protagonist seems deceptively simple. Wade serves as a foil to Joe, who despite faults such as gambling, drinking, cheating, and womanizing, emerges as a sympathetic and essentially decent man

compared with Wade. Brooks even believes, somewhat naively, that Joe “lives by his own code of honor” reminiscent of Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *Southern Honor*, though Bass’s observation that a “villain” dwells in Joe’s breast is more accurate (3; xii). While Joe’s “adoption” of Gary does inspire what Bass calls “strange and conflicting emotions,” Joe is obviously a far better father than Wade (xiii). Although he introduces the boy to the world of beer and prostitutes, Joe also gives Gary a job, food, clothes, and a sense of self-esteem. In the end, he even sacrifices his life for Gary by killing one of the men who raped the boy’s sister; for a man already on the wrong side of the law, the penalty is likely life imprisonment. Gary may never see Joe again by the end of the novel, but it seems that good has conquered evil, the problem of Wade has been resolved, and nothing more can be done.

But the story is not that simple. By overemphasizing the conflict of good and evil embodied in Joe and Wade, we run the risk of oversimplifying the novel’s complex ethical issues; Wade may be despicable, but he is not merely a two-dimensional monster. Several scenes cast Wade in a pathetic light that calls for a degree of compassion; furthermore, Joe’s inner demons are not as clearly demarcated from his virtues as they may seem; he is not simply a hero who lives by his own “code of honor” which allows for occasional nights out. His worst vices are not philandering, gambling and boozing, but aloofness and an unwillingness to involve himself in the problems of his own family. Both Joe and Wade demonstrate that shirking accountability for other human beings results not in freedom, but in dejected, isolated self-imprisonment. Joe breaks free, while Wade does not; but Wade’s failure does not negate society’s responsibility for him. In the

end, Wade exposes society's worse failure to extend a helping hand to him and his family.

Though morally repulsive, Wade is neither pure stereotype nor a mere symbol of evil. Unlike Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden or Anton Chigur, whose motives remain opaque and whose malevolence render them more demonic than human, Wade is revoltingly realistic; an animalistic survival instinct, perhaps a certain proclivity towards laziness and meanness, and all-consuming addiction drive his every move. Indeed, Wade seems more animal than human; a slave to addiction, he is incapable of forming meaningful human relationships. In Wade's bloodshot eyes, all human beings have value only insofar as they are potentially useful to him. When he can take by force from his own children or from his wife, he does not hesitate; but in situations that he cannot control with violence, Wade employs fascinating cunning and eloquence. He coaxes a butcher into giving him meat scraps by asking innocently for the manager when he is initially refused, fools a farmer into giving him money for his "sick" daughter in the hospital, and plays charming companion to Willie Russell and the drunk outside the liquor store until he can beat and rob them. When human interaction yields no promise of profit, however, Wade shuts down entirely and refuses to make any kind of connection. In the face of the law, he appears deaf and mute; he does not even look at the officer who reprimands him for stealing from the dumpster, and he simply goes limp when two policemen attempt to arrest him for public drunkenness.

The way Wade unremorsefully exploits his own children is undoubtedly his most heinous crime. He becomes a grotesquely inverted father figure who leeches off his family and abuses them instead of supporting and caring for them, refusing to assume

paternal responsibility in any situation. Wade's own son means nothing to him if he cannot make money off the boy; when Gary is no longer lucrative, Wade turns to contemplate the next object in sight that may bear promise of profit. The boy turns to his father with a silent cry for help when a drunk and aggressive Russell proceeds to beat him, but Wade will not even look in his son's direction: instead, Gary sees his father "drinking a beer and looking off into the trees as if this magnitude of land were his and he was pondering its worth. No help from that quarter, never had been, never would be" (92). Wade not only refuses to accept responsibility for his children, but also, and even more horrifically, actively sells them for a meager profit. The final scene captures the depths to which he has fallen: as Dorothy lies raped and bleeding in the bed of the truck Wade stole from Gary, a wordless testimony to her father's inhumanity, Joe sees Wade scramble away and climb "with a wild and pawing energy the brier-infested opposite bank, look back once and pile headlong over the fence to vanish in the tangled growth there" (342). By failing to assume his moral responsibilities as a father and by treating his children and other human beings as mere objects, Wade himself becomes inhuman, "pawing," lost, damned to life in a thorny wasteland without human interaction (342).

Yet at the moment when Wade most clearly seems the embodiment of evil—immediately after we discover that he sold his youngest son Calvin and triggered his wife's insanity—Brown thwarts our attempts to categorize and dismiss him. The strangers who repeatedly scorn Wade know nothing of his heinous crimes; in fact, the derision directed at Wade throughout the novel springs not from moral revulsion, but from unalloyed disgust at his slovenly appearance. In the eyes of the law, of society, and in his own eyes, Wade is figuratively and often literally trash: he reeks like garbage,

exuding a “giddy putrefaction of something gone far past bad”; he looks like rubbish, practically indistinguishable from the waste pile on which he sleeps, “nearly fetal with his clenched hands pillowing his head”; and he identifies with refuse, “a recycled reject with eyes sifting the dark and sorting the scattered scents,” seeking discarded objects as the most prized possessions available to his dirty hands (141; 265; 233). All manner of citizens—bartenders, bar patrons, bouncers, storekeepers, policemen, butchers—need only glance once at Wade before turning away in disgust. The county supervisor refers to Wade and Gary scornfully as “you people,” and the butcher even begrudges Wade meat scraps meant for dogs (47). The whole Jones family has internalized this rejection; they know that they are the bottommost members of society, lower than dogs, and that the rest of the world is not “like them” (133).

In the face of such overwhelming contempt, Wade becomes a pitiful figure, even a victim and an unwitting protestor on behalf of the poor. As society increasingly equates his very being with material destitution, Wade’s abject body becomes his only identity and means of protesting this annihilation of self: when two unfortunate policemen are forced to arrest him for public drunkenness, Wade lies “limp as a hot noodle, quietly exuding a rich reek... a perfect example of nonviolent protest” (141). In a moment of piteous irony, he feels warmly welcomed as a crowd of nighttime revelers quickly make way for him in a gesture of instinctive repulsion, only to reach a bouncer who shakes his head and blinks “slowly and heavily like some huge lizard” (136). The lyrical, biblical rhetoric of the passage lends the scene an almost mythical quality as the omniscient narrator intones symbolically: “Turn back, old man, begone. There is no room in the inn”

(136). Despite his depravity, Wade thus becomes an incongruous, unlikely Christ figure and a reproach to those who refuse to treat him as a human being.

To admit this failure and to extend kindness to Wade would require a degree of compassion, courage, introspection and resolve that few characters demonstrate. Instead, most of the people who interact with Wade shun him in an effort to forget his existence and evade responsibility for him. In court, his homelessness does not arouse sympathy; instead, it causes the policemen who arrested him to roll their eyes and the judge to chew his pen in consternation before flatly declaring, ““You might want to remember this. Your address would be General Delivery, London Hill, Mississippi, three eight six oh five. You’re charged with public drunkenness and resisting arrest”” (144). By denying the problem of Wade’s homelessness, the judge has effectively perpetuated the problem and implicated himself and the entire social structure in which Wade has no place. The Joneses’ poverty thus becomes a crippling disability that precludes their participation in society: Gary has no birth certificate or Social Security card, and even if he could read and write, has never had a chance to sign his name. When Joe incredulously muses, ““I thought everybody had a birth certificate,”” Gary simply responds, ““I ain’t. My mama said the place I was born you couldn’t get one”” (258). While Curt Fowler cashes his mother’s pension, Social Security and welfare checks to spend the funds on liquor and women, the Joneses barely survive and will never receive government aid; the social system, Brown infers, has failed miserably.

The deplorable governmental failure to adequately address poverty is not, however, Brown’s chief target in depicting the Joneses’ abjection; no form of government can entirely alleviate poverty. More appalling in Brown’s eyes is the

recurrent manifestation of the same heartless, lazy and hypocritical attitude on an individual level, exemplified by the liquor storeowner's reaction to Wade. Initially we commiserate somewhat with the owner as a putrid, conniving Wade trots into the immaculate little store with every intention of stealing a bottle or two. The owner sighs and glares at him from behind the counter, maintaining a watchful eye on his goods and keeping up a cantankerous inner dialogue:

Dealing with these people over and over. With the depths of their ignorance. The white ones like this were worse than the black ones like this. Where they came from he didn't know. How they existed was a complete mystery to him. How they lived with themselves. He tossed his list onto the counter without ever thinking he might have helped make them the way they were. (178)

The last sentence may mark the only point at which Brown's authorial voice seems to interrupt the predominantly limited third-person omniscient narrative. Ending the passage with "he tossed his list onto the counter" would suit the novel's style, which Lyons aptly describes as a "hyper-reminiscent *being in the scene*, less a displayed knowledge of psychologies than a conveyed sense of motivational inner tides" (112). Here, however, Brown deliberately inserts a rather startling moral judgment far outside the consciousness of the character—a judgment all the more shocking because in this situation, we tend to identify more with the storeowner than with Wade. After what he has done to his family, Wade deserves contempt. We have witnessed him beat his wife and children, steal Gary's pay, and sell his own children. How does the storeowner play a role in the tragedy of the Joneses' life?

As the painful, nearly comic conversation between Wade and the storeowner progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the storeowner's priorities are so unbalanced that they render him almost inhumane. He treats Wade like a child, only to discover that this homeless alcoholic is smarter than he looks and perhaps cleverer than himself; Wade presses the man with questions about the cost per half-pint of liquor until the storeowner must admit that he lied about Schnapps not coming in pint bottles. Wade proves himself the better businessman; his natural aptitude for mathematical calculations and manipulation leaves the storeowner befuddled and annoyed enough that he forgets to watch the intruder, and Wade escapes with a fifth of Schnapps. The storeowner does not even turn around after he hears the door shut behind Wade. In fact, the man scarcely cares that he did not make a profit or that Wade outsmarted him; he is merely relieved to be rid of the creature that was soiling the beauty of his immaculate little store. He practically begs Wade to go, simply to take a bottle and leave with or without payment, proffering his goods "like a sacrifice, a grail, a chalice" (182). His liquor bottle is his "chalice," his choicest possession: nothing has higher value than material goods, monetary profit, neatness, orderliness, or a tidy store that he must check "about thirty times a day to see that everything was in order" (182). Yet he is willing to offer this vagabond his chalice if the man will just "take one of them or leave or whatever" (182).

The storeowner's reaction seems desperate and disproportionate given the circumstances; he wants Wade to leave more than he wants him not to steal. Something about Wade appears to terrify him to such an extent that he is willing to sacrifice his precious goods without monetary compensation. To this man, Wade represents more than a financial liability; his very existence poses a threat to the storeowner's entire way of

life. The proprietor of this small liquor establishment desperately wants the whole outside world to resemble his pristine store, with every item in its proper place, no dirt on the floor, no dust on the shelves, and all rows perfectly straight at all times. Yet every so often someone like Wade jolts him into recognition that outside his store's glass walls, a disturbingly chaotic world exists where untamable kudzu reigns king of an "apparently impenetrable jungle of green vegetation that crept softly in the night, claiming houses and light poles, rusted cars and sleeping drunks, the old and the infirm, small dogs and children" (183).

The storeowner cannot bear even to imagine this extent of human suffering and attempts to clear his mind with a leisurely smoke, "sighing to himself with enormous lassitude" as he tries to convince himself that these people overtaken by kudzu, by poverty, *want* it that way:

Perhaps there was a whole city of them under there, deep, sheltered from the rain and shaded from the sun, with tenets and canopies pitched beneath, cooking fires, camps where the children played and where they hung their wash. Where else could they hide? Anything was possible. And they only came out once a month, when the welfare checks and the food stamps were issued, and they stocked up on everything, and disappeared back into their lair. Maybe one day he'd look. Maybe one day he'd lock the store and walk across the road and peer over the edge of the creepers and look down.... But he knew, really, that he wouldn't look. He wouldn't look because he didn't really want to know. He didn't want to be right. (183)

Their misery is self-inflicted, he reasons nervously; they are like animals, purposefully burrowing under the city to form a renegade group that feeds off the rest of society. They want to hide. They *like* being underground. They thrive there, where they are out of sight, out of mind.

If he looked over “the edge,” this man would find that even his wildest visions do not approach the true conditions in which the Joneses and others like them live. They do not have radios, TV’s, Honda generators, refrigerators, tents or camps as he imagines, and many of them do not receive welfare checks or food stamps. They do not “stock up”—they lack even the most basic necessities. The store owner’s refusal to acknowledge the reality of this situation is due not so much to ignorance or naiveté, but to a more insidious and carefully concealed laziness, cowardice, and fundamental moral weakness. If “these people” willingly bring their poverty on themselves or if they live comfortably on government aid, the rest of society can shrug their shoulders, wipe their hands and walk away with a clean conscience. If not, then the storeowner finds himself in an uncomfortable situation. He can either pretend that the world outside the glass walls of his life does not exist, or he can open the door, step outside, and look “over the edge” at the mass of human suffering that reveals his cauterized, glass-barricaded world as a sham and a defense against moral responsibility. The storeowner’s spotless glass chamber becomes not a safe haven, but a lifeless tomb; even his absurd idea of what poverty looks like “underground” teems with unbridled life in a way that contrasts sharply with the sterilized atmosphere of his store. No meaningful human relationships can take root in the glass façade of his ostensibly decontaminated existence; the only sense of kinship he can feel is an almost twisted fondness for the little glass bottle that he sets back in the cooler

after Wade leaves, “gently among its brothers, so as not to disturb them, knock them over” (182). The glass walls may shatter at any time and cause the fragile, false order to collapse beneath the pressure of outside reality, fully exposing his hypocrisy.

Joe initially lives in a similarly defensive, cauterized mental state in which he attempts to negotiate human relationships with cash alone. Financially, he is both fair and generous: he declares proudly to Gary that he pays “a day’s pay for a day’s work,” and he is also willing to buy beer for his workers and neighbors and give much of his earnings to his ex-wife and daughter (116). His surreptitious efforts to slip bills into Charlotte’s and Theresa’s hands, however, are less innocent and kind-hearted than they may seem; both refuse his money because they know that it is a poor substitute for a real relationship with him. Even when they were young, Joe was uninvolved in his children’s lives: “When they cried he never heard. Charlotte was the one who took care of them and raised them, Charlotte was the one they cried for when they were sick. Not him. It was never him” (121). He did not hear their cries because he did not want to, and even when Theresa and her brother have grown up, their father will not let them affect how he chooses to live his own life; he will not even go out of his way to visit his new grandchild, though he knows it is his paternal duty.

He feels his guilt—he finds it hard to look Theresa in the eyes, and when he tries to laugh off her accusations, his face feels “as if it might crack”—but he does not feel it deeply enough to change (121). In a desperate attempt to evade responsibility, Joe tries to keep all of his relationships superficial; he prefers to return to a home echoing with the sound of the TV rather than human voices and to lie on his couch with the fluorescent screen as his only company, watching “things happening on the television screen without

seeing them and hear[ing] the words the actors [are] saying without hearing them. They [are] like dreams, real but not real” (30). He does not even want to wake up next to Connie for fear that the moment may become intimate; instead, he moves to his usual spot on the couch in front of the indifferent TV, which does not fuss at him for drinking too much, does not require an emotional response, and does not make ethical demands. Joe prefers his home be as lifeless as the storeowner’s liquor shop, if messier—a place where he can lie on his couch “in the stillness with his hands crossed on his chest like a man laid out in a coffin, his toes sticking out from under the edge of the bedspread,” dead to the demands of the outside world (26).

Gary slowly awakens in Joe the realization that denial and evasion of human need are not morally upright stances. Joe may be able to justify his neglect of his family by telling himself that his children and wife are better off without him and that money will rectify the situation; Gary’s utter deprivation, however, brooks no such excuses. Joe witnesses first hand that “a day’s pay for a day’s work” will not alleviate the Joneses’ suffering when he pays Gary his wages and drops father and son off near the abandoned house they call home:

The boy looked back. Joe could read his face. Panic. I need the money. Don’t leave yet... The old man and the boy faced each other in the dust of the road, like boxers. Then the boy fell. He kicked the ground, on his back, holding his pockets. The old man bent over, pawing at him, but Joe didn’t wait to see any more. (116-17)

Like the liquor-store owner, Joe does not want to “look over the edge” (183). He has been avoiding the edge for his entire life, even in the face of vicious, brutal corruption: he

recalls, for example, how in jail he and the rest of the inmates looked the other way when young boys were raped, how “the old cons ... would take the young and pretty boys down and how they would muffle their screams while they raped them. How everyone turned their heads and looked away because it didn’t concern them and it wasn’t them” (342). The result has been not gleeful freedom from responsibility, but a monotonous death-in-life, a routine and meaningless existence un-brightened by human relationships or kindness.

Gary gives Joe a chance to redeem himself from the guilt he bears for the rape victims, for his family, and for the rest of humanity whose suffering and silent pleas for help he has ignored. Joe’s instinctive response is to turn away in terror at the prospect of stepping outside his comfortable, banal existence, but Gary forces Joe to look at him long enough to comprehend the depths of his need and to respond with empathy. The boy does not own a pair of jeans, cannot read or write, does not have a Social Security card or a birth certificate, has never been to school, does not know how to brush his teeth, and does not know what a church is; Joe finally cannot help but extend a hand, offering not only financial assistance but also friendship. “Friends don’t buy things from one another,” he tells Gary after coming to a revolutionary decision to “go up to the house one day and get [Gary]. See what kind of shape they [are] in up there” (259). The earlier Joe would have been paralyzed at the prospect of going out of his way to visit the Joneses’ makeshift dwelling; now, however, he finds himself drawn so far into Gary’s life that he must assume some responsibility for the boy. In the end, he never has a chance to visit them. Instead, he drives Wade off and kills Russell for raping Gary’s sister, leaving Gary his new truck and facing the rest of his lifetime in jail.

The recent film version of *Joe* (2013) stands as an ironic testament to the prevailing tendency to deny the existence of abject human poverty and general reluctance to take individual moral responsibility for other human beings. Joe dies in a shootout with Russell that conveniently and decisively determines his fate, and the conclusion of the film finds the Joneses in a state of serenity and financial stability. After catching a glimpse of Gary's youngest sister reclining idyllically in the sunbathed arms of a mammoth tree, we see Gary happily planting saplings where he and Joe had previously worked to destroy the old forest of unusable wood, a smile stretching across the boy's face as his new boss promises him forty hours a week, overtime, and a job next summer. Mother nature, it seems, has healed Dorothy's physical and emotional wounds and will continue to nurture her. Gary has a full-time job and newfound financial security. There seems to be little left to do for the Joneses after this tidy and agreeable conclusion; they want for nothing and appear quite happy. The epilogue of the novel is far more tragic and realistic. Gary, his mother and youngest sister watch birds overhead migrating south as winter approaches, "spread out over the sky in a distant brotherhood" that the forlorn onlookers below will never experience (345). Unlike the geese, the Joneses cannot escape winter or hardship; their mother already feels the cold "seep into her bones," and all three know that for them, the "great blue wilderness" of the sky lies "forever beyond" (345). Despite Joe's efforts, the Joneses' problems clearly endure; Gary and his family are little better off than before, and Joe's business remains largely unfinished. Their dejection serves as a reminder to readers that society has similarly abandoned much of humanity, leaving the poor to survive on their own; whether the Joneses will survive is uncertain

with Gary out of work and their only protection from the elements being a drafty shell of a house.

At the end of the novel, the conflict between Joe and Wade, or Joe and Russell, may be described as one between good and evil: Joe has witnessed their depravity and taken a stance against them, has assumed the role of father and a friend to a boy with neither. The main conflict of the novel, however, lies not in this final confrontation between two morally polarized characters, but in the moral struggle within individuals. Joe's deliberation about whether to engage with Gary on a deeper, human level; the liquor storeowner's complacent inner dialogue while dealing with Wade; the policemen, the butcher, and the bartenders' contemptuous reactions to Wade's disheveled appearance; the prisoners' refusal to intervene on behalf of rape victims—these are the most urgent conflicts in *Joe* and the ones that make the novel so difficult to read. We wince in pain as Wade beats Gary and steals his paycheck or as he takes thirty dollars from Russell while Dorothy cringes in the truck bed, knowing that as we read, the same situation is occurring somewhere in the world—not only on other continents, but also close by, in our own country and even in our own states and cities. We may be tempted to look away from Larry Brown's *Rough South*, to retreat to the storeowner's glass house where we can focus on the problems of the past instead of the present; but Brown shatters those glass walls and exposes the reality of our world and of the contemporary South for what it is: rough, complex and chaotic, fraught with human misery that demands attention and compassion.

Chapter Three

Crossroads and Memory in William Gay's *Provinces of Night*

Perhaps the most well-known William Gay story is that of the paperhanger—not the short story bearing that title, but the story of Gay himself, long-time dry-wall hanger and son of a sharecropper. Gay was the first in his family to graduate from high school, where one of his teachers noticed him reading Zane Grey novels and gave him Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. "Wolfe's novel," William Giraldi relates in an interview-based essay on Gay's corpus, "ignited him to his core; it proffered the insight that this can be done, that a writing life for him was not a pipe dream" (331). After that, Gay quickly found some of his favorite authors like Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy: "The Signet edition of *A Good Man is Hard to Find*," Gay told Derrick Hill, "was the best thirty-five cents I ever spent." Gay even formed a fairly close friendship with the elusive McCarthy while they both lived in Tennessee; he talked to him frequently on the phone and read *Suttree* in manuscript (Hill). Literature by fellow working-class writers also inspired Gay—he was an admirer of Larry Brown's, whom he met at the 2007 Oxford Conference for the Book (Cash *A Writer's Life* 242). Despite thematic differences in their written work, that Brown and Gay came from blue-collar backgrounds and taught themselves to write became the basis of friendship between the two and inspired much comparison of their fiction by readers and reviewers.

Gay faced the same challenge Brown faced: that of being known for his writing instead of for the story of how he became a writer. Reviews of Gay's work usually dwell more on biography than on his writing, creating what fellow Tennessee novelist Tony Earley calls the "myth of the drywall hanger"—that is, the myth that Gay is "some kind

of working class savant” or a “Rain Man of Letters.” The implication is that without an M.F.A., without exposure to academia, Gay should never have become a successful writer; that he did achieve literary success must be explained as an anomaly, an exception to the rule of the elite. “Who knows,” Earley speculates cynically, “maybe five hundred years from now, some misguided but clamorous band of second-tier scholars will waste time debating who *really* wrote the books of William Gay because, God knows, a drywall hanger from Hohenwald, Tennessee, with little formal education, would have been incapable of doing so himself.”

In reality almost no time passed before audiences started questioning Gay’s ability to produce his own work: “I had this one woman ask me if I had anyone helping me write my books,” Gay related with a laugh to Keith Rawson. “She said, ‘I’ve known your family a long time and they’re not that smart and I’ve known you since you were growing up and you weren’t that smart either.’ And she wanted to know if I had anybody who took out the little words and put in the big words?” Gay shrugged her comment off with humility and good humor, but similar logic plaguing Gay’s reputation in academia is far from humorous: the overwhelming silence on the subject of William Gay in Southern criticism is a testament to the enduring class-based prejudice that haunts working-class authors even in the allegedly liberal world of academia.¹⁶ In the wake of the birth of New

¹⁶Scholars have produced four critical discussions of William Gay’s work to date: William Giraldi’s interview-based overview of Gay’s corpus, “A World Almost Rotten: The Fiction of William Gay,” *Southern Review* 45.2 (2009): 330-44; Randall Wilhelm’s “‘Scratchy 78s on a Victrola’: American Roots Music in William Gay’s Short Fiction,” *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual*, ed. Ted Olson, Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2009. 189-214; Cedric Gael Bryant’s “‘Things Only a Miracle Can Set to Rights’: Reading Flannery O’Connor, Violence, and Ambiguity in William Gay’s ‘The Paperhanger,’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 66.2 (2013): 303-16; and a brief discussion of Gay’s novel *The Long Home* in Thomas Ærvold Bjerre’s “Southern Evil, Southern Violence: Gothic

Southern Studies and invigorating new discussions about the Global South, fiction by blue-collar authors like Gay has been overlooked as too provincial and unsophisticated; the latent fear, it seems, is that acknowledging Rough South fiction like Gay's will cause Southern criticism to backslide and forfeit the progress it has made since the turn of the century. But one need hardly linger over Gay's work to see that his fiction is not as insular and parochial as critics seem to expect.

Gay's work engages closely with the theoretical debates currently taking place among New Southern Studies critics, and in *Provinces of Night* (2002) in particular, he effortlessly draws upon the Rough South and the Global South to create a sort of crossroads between the two ostensibly incompatible worlds. The first part of *Provinces of Night* concludes with its young protagonist, Fleming Bloodworth, trudging home on a rural Tennessee road under the moonlight of an oddly soundless night in 1952. Home holds no great prospects for Fleming; his mother abandoned him long ago, his father, Boyd, has left hoping to find her, and their forlorn son must now return to a shell of a home on the outskirts of Ackerman's Field. Fleming's remaining family members offer scant solace; his grandfather, old E.F. Bloodworth, set a family precedent many years ago when he abandoned his wife and three sons. Now Boyd has followed in his footsteps and Fleming is left with his alcoholic, degenerate Uncle Warren; his malicious and apparently clairvoyant Uncle Brady; and his increasingly forgetful grandmother, Julia. The Bloodworth family seems cursed, and the future holds little hope for Fleming if his life

Residues in the Works of William Gay, Barry Hannah, and Cormac McCarthy." *The Scourges of the South? Essays on 'The Sickly South' in History, Literature and Popular Culture*, eds. Thomas Ærvold Bjerre and Beata Zawadka, Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2014. 77-91.

continues in the same vein.

On this particular night, Fleming moves in an isolated “pocket of silence” where time seems to stand still while he contemplates his precarious existence: insects and birds cease whirring and chirping as Fleming approaches and begin again only after he has passed (72). Past and present blend into a surreal moment in which memories hold more authority than material reality: well-known landmarks start to swim into view not before Fleming’s bodily eyes, but before his mind’s eye, “out of memory” (72). He can feel the presence of figures walking beside him and raises his eyes to behold his childhood self and his father moving through the trees like ghosts. In their company, Fleming trudges on in a daze until he reaches a crossroads “dusted with silver” in the moonlight and fading into hazy “velvet trees” far ahead (73). Even in the darkness, Fleming knows what lies ahead: the left road leads to his grandmother’s house, and the other path leads to his childhood home. Bewildered, wondering at the “mystic” nature of the crossroads, at their way of “doubl[ing] the options, confus[ing] both pursuer and pursued,” and not knowing “which he was,” Fleming stops (73). He feels vaguely that both paths demand renunciation either of his childhood or of hope for a better future, and unable to decide, he simply sleeps at the crossroads.

It seems that Fleming’s choice lies between living in the past and claiming his Bloodworth roots, or seizing the possibility of a new, if nebulous future: he can choose either simply to walk home and continue in his father’s footsteps, or strike out toward his grandmother’s house and break with his childhood. The road to his own home is hardly enticing; Boyd will likely never return, and we discover that their old house will soon disappear entirely under the floodwaters of a new dam being built nearby. The whole of

Ackerman's Field, in fact, seems threatened with extinction; the dam will soon put most of it underwater. If the rest of the town existed today, it would probably be scarcely recognizable; the inhabitants would likely gather at Walmart instead of Itchy Mama's porch. In a way, Randall Wilhelm's view of Gay's fiction seems accurate: he describes Gay's work as employing "a subversive strategy that undermines postmodern notions of progress and that posits instead a backward glance towards a more 'authentic' American culture that is as enduring as the land itself" (213). In this light, *Provinces of Night* might seem a mournful tribute to a bygone era, a tale told by one of the aging men on Itchy Mama's porch—a dying, wistful daydream.

In reality, however, Gay's backward glance is far more complex than this nostalgic characterization allows. Perhaps Fleming's choice lies not so much between past and future, but between two possible futures: one cut off from the past, or one informed by the past. New Southern Studies itself recently finds itself at a similar crossroads: one can imagine Michael Kreyling staring at the same fork in the road as Fleming while he describes the change that has been taking place in Southern Studies roughly since the turn of the century:

Some players sprint into new territory, some continue by the old rules, hoping that the shift is an illusion or that another turn will bring the wheel back to *status quo ante*, still others twist slowly in the wind unable to decide between the old and the new. Southern Studies is in such a shift now.... In such shifts there is always an element of calculated amnesia, strategic forgetting. We do make progress, but crabwise rather than in a straight line, and we often return to a place near our starting point. (4)

As Kreyling sees it, Southern critics must choose between old and new, between past and future, without becoming amnesiac. He has faith that we will make progress, even if it is slow and “crabwise”—the “old dog” of Southern criticism, he claims, “can and must learn new tricks”—but we need to bring some of the past with us as we face the future (4, 16).

One overwhelming question remains: how exactly do we “maintain the delicate balance between the new and the old” (Kreyling 5)? Throughout this process, Kreyling explains, “Memory struggles with amnesia: what to remember and what to forget, and most importantly at what cost to whom” (5). Finding a balance between memory and forgetting demands what Coleman Hutchison calls a kind of “waltz,” an anxious dance in an uneasy space between past and future (694). Sarah Ford, too, recognizes the difficulties inherent in Kreyling’s proposal and responds with both enthusiasm and trepidation, wondering how we approach the past without “strategical[ly] forgetting” narratives (Kreyling 4): “A new generation of southern literary critics,” she explains, “might not define ‘old’ as William Faulkner, the Fugitive-Agrarian critics, the Civil War, or the plantation romance but instead the authors and stories previously unread and untold, ignored and repressed” (23). Southern criticism and literature, Ford believes, are in little danger of complete amnesia; on the contrary, they cannot escape the ghosts of the past that famously haunt characters like Quentin Compson. “Twentieth century psychology,” Ford continues, “has taught us that the repressed tends to resurface, bubble up to disturb the system. Instead of forgetting the old, southern literary criticism seems indeed to be haunted by ghosts from the past.... But the difference is the identity of the ghosts; the question ‘which old?’ produces a different answer” (23). Ghosts will continue

to haunt the subconscious of critics and writers alike, and Ford posits that the best way to avoid the amnesia Kreyling speaks of is simply to “listen to the ghosts” (24).

Though Gay has received negligible attention from Southern literary critics, *Provinces of Night* offers profound insight on the quandary that Southern Studies scholars face. In many ways, Gay’s answer to this dilemma parallels Ford’s: ghosts, memories and dreams litter the pages of *Provinces of Night*, and the message seems to be, *listen*. Heed the ghosts, the apparitions that haunt Fleming insistently as he approaches the crossroads or the specter that Fleming’s grandmother beheld the night her father-in-law died: a “white shape ... comin faster than a person could walk” and that paused before climbing over the garden fence (36). Brady, pretending to read a magazine but actually mesmerized by the story, notes that the ghost seems to have been oddly corporeal: “I always wondered why a haint or a warnin had to crawl through a barbed wire fence.... It looks to me like it would just hit that fence like it never amounted to nothin and keep on goin’” (37). E.F. Bloodworth’s dreams are similarly “tactile” (131). The objects in his dreams have such “strength and clarity” he can almost touch and feel them: he can even feel Brady’s heart “hammering under his hand, see his chest rise and fall with his breathing” during a dream (114). The immediacy and apparent corporeality of these specters lend them a particular urgency; their message seems insistent, vital, and they cling to the living like parasites. E.F. feels the clutch of the past like a skeletal embrace, “bone arms” clasping him “like some old desiccated lover he [can]not be shut of” (115). These ghosts are like the undead, inexorable and insatiable; they simulate physicality and demand attention, forcing the living to confront them.

Despite their insistency, however, these ghosts never speak. They fade as quickly as they materialize, eventually becoming not only mute but also intangible and weak. The vivid figures in E.F.'s dreams dissipate as he opens his eyes; his memories become "bitter," "dry," mere "ashes in his mouth," and the ghost that Julia witnesses disappears as soon as she averts her eyes (115). The younger generation seems even less attuned to these specters of the past; the figures Fleming sees in the forest before the crossroads appear "transparent as water, insubstantial as a handful of smoke" as they pass through tress "like revenants" (73). Deciphering the message of these silent, enigmatic ghosts becomes a more problematic endeavor than Ford envisions; we cannot piece together present and past by simply "listen[ing] to the ghosts" if they do not communicate clearly, much less if they disappear entirely (Ford 24). The true danger in *Provinces of Night* lies not so much in the possibility that people will refuse to listen to ghosts, but in the more alarming realization that these ghosts will not continue to haunt them forever.

By the time the prologue and epilogue take place, the silent ghosts that haunted Ackerman's Field in the 1950s have retreated so far that they are now outside the range of both sight and sound, and the Bloodworths' narrative seems perilously close to being utterly forgotten. In the prologue, a construction crew works under the heat of a sun "hung over the ravaged earth like a malediction," bulldozing the site where Dee Hixson's house once stood (1). One of the men, Risner, finds a Mason jar in the rubble and opens it, hoping it contains money; instead, the jar slips out of his hands and crashes to the ground and discloses its disturbing contents:

In the splintered glass of this transparent crypt lay diminutive human bones of marvelous delicacy. Bones fragile and fluted as a bird's tiny skull

with eye-holes black and blind, thin as paper, brittle as parchment.

Scattered as if cast in a necromancer's divination, as if there might be a pattern to them, order. "It looks like there was somebody in there," Risner said lamely. (2)

Risner's response demonstrates his lack of knowledge about the territory he and his crew are currently leveling; we later discover that this property served as graveyard for the newborn and aborted children of Dee Hixson's notoriously promiscuous daughters. E.F. relates the story to Fleming with an air of incredulity; he suspects the rumor is true, but the tightly sealed fruit jars buried deep under the Hixson property preserve the family secret.

Now, years later, the Hixsons' privacy remains paradoxically inviolate when an oblivious construction crew unearths the carefully concealed Mason jars and forcibly exposes their morbid contents. The newborn child's tiny bones lie scattered across the freshly bulldozed ground "as if there might be a pattern to them, order," but these men have no historical context to help them decipher this configuration; all memory of this town and of its people has vanished (2). The epilogue seems to seal the townspeople's fate as impervious troops of state employees dig up graves in order to move the dead and make room for the new dam; they unearth E.F.'s casket with a backhoe and dump it unceremoniously with the others onto a truck. This epilogue literally brings to life the horror that Walter Benjamin believes threatens contemporary society: namely, that of historical amnesia. "The danger," he explains in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.... In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it...."

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (255). When all of the tombs in Ackerman’s Field have been evacuated, the floodwaters rush over the valley, covering the hill where Fleming’s house used to be, “everything drowning,” “old voices echo[ing] stubbornly until they drowned, remonstrations and petulant complaints and old worn and useless endearments the rising waters silenced forever,” confirming Benjamin’s dire prophesy (292). The waters slowly climb toward the crossroads where Fleming once spent the night, gradually covering it so that at last the “underwater road looked inexplicable, freighted with lost meaning, like some old imponderable road an ancient race had built to a place that no longer existed” (292). The brittle bones of the dead now signify nothing; the history of the people of Ackerman’s Field seems forgotten.

If the prologue and epilogue constituted the entire story, there would be no hope of recovering these voices of the past—but these portentous scenes only serve to bookend the Bloodworths’ narrative, which we hear despite pressures from all sides that threaten to annihilate it. These amnesiac forces hold the narrative in vice-like grip, but they have not yet prevailed; the epilogue seems more an ominous prediction than a statement of fact. Gay articulates in no uncertain terms the dangers of what Wilhelm calls “contemporary, ahistorical Southern culture,” but he also proposes a tentative solution similar to the “mixing” of present and past that Kreyling and Ford advocate (211; Ford 19). *Provinces of Night* offers an ambivalent answer that acts as both a complement and a somewhat distrustful counterbalance to Kreyling’s optimism regarding progress and Ford’s proposition that we simply “listen to the ghosts” (Ford 24).

Instead of picking progress over the past or waiting for ghosts to appear, Gay suggests that we seek out the ghosts as often as possible without sinking entirely into nostalgia. Merely listening to the ghosts will not ensure their survival; we must do more than listen. We must actively seize these memories and cultivate a sense of the past in order to keep the ghosts alive. Moreover, we need not rely only on ghosts: Gay echoes Benjamin's belief that "not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge" (260). "With her leathery face and beaked nose," Fleming relates, his grandmother "looked less like an Indian woman than some old chief, the repository of the summed knowledge all his forebears had passed on by the flickering light of council fires" (32). Sometimes Fleming exhibits interest in her stories; at other times he loses patience and leaves before she can finish because he doesn't "want to hear it. All these old troubles were burdensome and hard to carry, folks would load you down if you'd let them" (233). Later, he may regret his impatience when both his grandmother and his grandfather are gone: "Now you see me, now you don't," Fleming imagines E.F. teasing; "wink and I'm gone" (175). Look too far into the future, obsess too much over progress, and I'll disappear entirely, vanish into thin air.

Progress, Gay implies, is a dangerous word; it suggests that the future depends on our deliberate choices about which past we bring with us and which we abandon. Instead, Gay asks us to relinquish our desire for certainty and our dependence on a traditional sense of time, urging us to accept our limits and be willing to live with a certain degree of ambiguity. In the end, we discover that the image of the crossroads presents the choice between past and future as a deceptively clear binary. Fleming initially seems indecisive when he refuses to make a choice, but it becomes increasingly evident that his decision to

stay at the crossroads is a perfectly viable alternative. In doing so, Fleming provides us with an option that does not require strategic forgetting, privileging the past over the future, or vice versa; it is impossible to construct an accurate and usable picture of the past merely by selecting and connecting memories. By lingering at the crossroads, Fleming chooses instead to live in an amalgamated present crisscrossed with strands of memories that create not so much a decipherable puzzle as an impressionistic and beautiful collage.

Integrating past, present and future thus produces not linear progression, but a fragmented, kaleidoscope view of time that resembles Benjamin's model of historical memory: "The true picture of the past," Benjamin believes, "flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (255). *Provinces of Night* proposes a similar model of historical memory in which characters catch only glimpses of a past that seeps out of reach as swiftly and surely as sand in an hourglass. Dreams, memories and ghosts offer only a mirage-like view of the past that threatens at any moment to sink forever out of sight below the horizon. Conscious efforts to reconstruct the past usually prove unsuccessful; even when they deliberately choose to remember, when they are trying desperately not to succumb to amnesia, the Bloodworths find that the past eludes their grasp. E.F., for example, wakes from his dream about Brady's childhood believing that for a "dislocated moment" the past has subsumed the present, but just few seconds later he finds that he cannot "regather the threads" of the dream (114-15). Memories prove to be only fleeting impressions of the past gleaned as though through a glass darkly: E.F. wants to remember and wishes that "the past was a place you could backtrack to," but wishing does not make

it so—the past remains as inscrutable and distant as the landscape he watches flashing by through the “dark glass” of the passenger side window of Coble’s truck like Benjamin’s “true picture of the past” (115; 255).

Repeated attempts to arrange these flashes of memory into a cohesive structure prove frustratingly futile. The prologue hints that there is a “pattern” in the arrangement of the child’s bones in the dirt, just out of reach, available to a “necromancer’s divination” (2). If we try hard enough, it seems, we can piece together the fragments like a puzzle and come up with something resembling the window of the cabstand Boyd approaches early in the story, glass “cracked in myriad fissures mended with duct tape and the entire window bulg[ing] slightly outward as if barely containing some internal force” (13). When we have taped it together, no matter how messily, we will be able to discern the nature of this internal force driving time and existence—or so Fleming initially believes. He reflects that with Raven Lee Halfacre’s head on his shoulder during his heady summer of first love, the fireflies had “seemed not separate entities but a single being, a moving river of light that flowed above the dark water like its negative image and attained a transient and fragile dominion over the provinces of night” (161). But this moment of understanding passes as quickly and thoroughly as the ghosts of Ackerman’s Field; Fleming later realizes that this transient moment has become a memory from which he is now doubly distanced. Elapsed time and newfound confusion render both the past and the future eminently enigmatic: the “undone curl on Raven Lee’s forehead,” he discovers, “formed with her left eye a question that he could not decipher, let alone answer. In the end, he was left only with the fireflies he had seen that summer night in Clifton, their fragile and provisional light endlessly echoing the movement of the dark

water, visionary and profoundly mysterious as a glimpse he'd been permitted into the secret clockwork of the world itself" (287).

Seeking to understand the "secret clockwork" of the world only results in defeat or even insanity (287). The only person who professes to understand the mechanisms of this clockwork is Brady: "I was born with a caul," he tells Junior Albright in a "singsong" voice, "I always knowed things. It seems natural to me, a better question might be how come you can't. I reckon I just see a wider range of things than most folks. Other people can just see the things, I can see the connections between them" (100). Whether Brady truly possesses any unique insight is highly dubious; as Fleming eventually realizes, his prophetic moments seem more the result of chance than genuine power: "The slap of Brady's cards on an oil-cloth tabletop told of a future preordained but the boy suspected that future events swirl like smoke and are as hard to hold in your hand for every event is connected to every other event like the veins in a leaf" (287). Fleming's experience in the haunted house below Dee Hixson's suggests that endeavors to trace these connections result not in the lucidity Brady claims, but in mental breakdown. After spending weeks alone in the forest, Fleming enters the house, entranced by its aura and the rumors about it; he examines old newspaper clippings on the walls that tell of violent deeds and murders, trying "to divine answers to this old lost mystery, the inevitable why of it" (40-1). To his surprise he finds that the longer he listens, the more palpable the past becomes: "In the charged gloom he hear[s] the rattle of trace chains, a horse's hooves click on stone, heavy footsteps on the porch, the soft laughter of children at play" (41). Fleming leaves quickly, terrified, suddenly feeling that "madness track[s] him like a homeless dog, need[s] only a kind word or gesture to throw its lot with him forever" (41).

Grappling with the handles of time, forcing them to bend one way or the other, trying to relive the past or change the future, is at worst maddening and at best a fruitless endeavor—as fruitless as hunting the hog Junior Albright begrudgingly accepts as payment for his painting services and promptly loses to a wide expanse of thick Tennessee forest: Albright, we are told, “hunted the hog for what must have been hours, letting time get away from him.... The hog seemed to be playing with him, drawing him ever deeper into the lush riverbottom undergrowth. Just when the realization of how crazy this all was began to sink in the hog would show itself or slow tantalizingly and permit him to almost but not quite catch it” (138-9). In a world that is “forever restructuring itself,” Fleming eventually realizes that time itself is more elusive than Albright’s hog: “He suspect[s] that there [are] no givens, no map through the maze. Here in falling dark with the world rolling simultaneously toward him and away from him everything seem[s] no more than random” (145, 287). All his efforts to decode the mystery of time and existence fail; writing and Raven Lee Halfacre provide momentary solace, but in the end, “there was little that seemed salvageable” (287).

The rest of the Bloodworths make similar attempts to decipher their own lives, forever searching for the key that will uncover the root of their troubled family history and decode the causal chain of events that led to their present web of failed relationships. But they cannot rely on an elaborate Faulknerian genealogy to trace their origins and determine their identities, and their botched attempts to understand their own past result only in further confusion. Age does not promise insight into this conundrum; E.F. and Julia find themselves as bewildered as Fleming about the meaning and direction of their lives. While reminiscing about her disastrous marriage with E.F., Julia gazes at the light

coming through the branches as though it can offer her solace, “thinking for a time that she could divine pattern there, order” (134). The dark outlines of the boughs against the brightness of the sky form a maze that suggest a semblance of order; but at last Julia abandons her endeavor, concluding that what appears to be a pattern is “ultimately as random and unordered as life” (134). With sudden finality and clarity, Julia realizes that she will never be able to trace a train of causality that explains how she got where she is now, and neither will the Bloodworth men. E.F. cannot neatly set his affairs in order by coming home; returning to Ackerman’s Field will not let him change the “immovable” past or wake him from the “bad dream” of his present (115). All that remains after the sun sets and darkness settles in is the sound of banjo music rising and falling, mixing with the whirring of the cicadas and crickets, “ancient and myth-laden and somehow enticing, like sound seeping through the cracks of a place you couldn’t get to anymore” (135).

That we cannot relive the past in its entirety, however, does not mean that we can have no knowledge of the past or any understanding whatsoever of the present. The ambiguity that Cedric Gael Bryant observes in Gay’s short fiction reverberates throughout *Provinces of Night*, but in a way that seems less disturbing: “Interpretive possibility reproduces itself,” Bryant claims, “like a disease unchecked, and its spread, through whatever vehicle of language or machine, becomes the only certainty” (314). Characters in *Provinces of Night* certainly never achieve a great degree of certainty, but this lack of definitiveness in their lives could hardly be characterized as a rampant disease—perhaps it is more like a kind of benign tumor they must live with—inconvenient, but far from fatal. They sense that the world ticks to the tune of a “secret

clockwork,” a mysterious “internal force,” but this force is simply outside their comprehension (287, 13). The problem is not necessarily that there is no logic to the unfolding of time, but that human attempts to explain this logic are reductive and insufficient. Most of the time, Fleming reflects, you simply have to accept it as “life blindsides you so hard you can taste the bright copper blood in your mouth”; but at rare intervals, it also “beguiles you with a gift of profound and appalling beauty” (287). Most of the time you just have to “do the best you can and let it roll,” sustained by the memory of those flashes of beauty (287).

The problem, then, lies not in looking backward as we are pushed inevitably forward, in listening to the ghosts, in telling stories, or in preserving memories. Rather, the true problem lies in reducing the past to a mere mechanism in the hands of progress—in trying to explain the past in definitive terms, in attempting to “get” it, in believing that we can calculatingly select certain items from our memory bank and discard others in order to make progress. As Benjamin explains, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). True historians do not purport to effortlessly navigate “homogenous, empty time” in order to give self-satisfied accounts of how historical events really occurred; instead, they experience a vibrant, unique kind of time “filled by the presence of the now” (261).

Real historical memory, in other words, is the experience and enjoyment of intersectionality—the discovery and delight in temporal crossroads between past and present. The metaphor of the crossroads represents a notion of time not as progressing linearly from one event to the next toward a goal, but rather as a “constellation” formed

between eras (Benjamin 263). At the crossroads, time “involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (262-3). In *Provinces of Night*, the grandmother’s house embodies the concept of a temporal crossroads and facilitates the birth of Benjamin’s “monads”—sudden crystallizations of time that occur when memory seeps into the present. In Julia’s home, past, present and future converge in a single moment that results not in a coherent continuum, but in a mysterious constellation:

Here within these walls time was of no moment. The walls were adorned with calendars but they had measured years already immured in memory, five years old, ten years old. The house was full of clocks but some of them were stopped and of the ones that worked no two kept a similar hour. A simple request for the time of the day was a cause for consternation, for much comparing of the accuracy of one clock with another to arrive at some approximation of the hour. Here time did not matter. Here another set of rules was in order, out of another century. (35)

In this environment, Benjamin would say, “time stands still and has come to a stop” in a manner that allows us to productively “blast open the continuum of history” (262). Consternation arises not at the prospect of not knowing the precise hour, but at the demand for such precision—what need is there for counting hours and seconds, for trying to establish a temporal or “causal connection between various moments in history” (Benjamin 263)? Instead, Gay and Benjamin propose a method of living in the present

that allows for a sense of mystery and encourages brief, vivid, and beautiful encounters with the past and even, at least for Benjamin, with the divine.

What ensues is a dynamic, warm, pulsating and comforting existence that occasionally approaches the verge of ecstasy: after spending one night in this charged atmosphere, Fleming wakes up with “no idea what time it was. The room began to feel like an enormous womb that was keeping him alive with its warmth, its comfort. It seemed alive, he imagined its stertorous breathing, he could feel its dark heart’s blood coursing through the wiring, the plumbing” (38). But living at the crossroads can also be terrifying: one navigates these dark, uncertain provinces by touch more than by sight, by feeling the call of “flesh calling to flesh not across distance but across vast gulfs of time” (267). Only the call of flesh, of love, it seems, is strong enough to guide us through this maze of time, “wormholed and faulted, honeycombed in mazes that cross and recross” (268). Sometimes flesh calls to flesh across the walls, giving guidance and certainty where confusion usually reigns; Julia, for instance, knows the second E.F. dies even though he is miles away, and knows that the perception of this fact has “altered” the world and herself “forever” (269). Most of the time, however, we merely feel our way blindly through this honeycombed labyrinth like Fleming, looking for a “fragile and provisional light” (287).

Fleming is tempted to believe that he has to keep moving in order to live—“no move is the wrong move” and “life is motion, stasis is death”—but this bit of wisdom from Warren proves misleading (256). In fact, frequent pauses at crossroads between past and present are the only way toward true insight in *Provinces of Night*. Hurrying toward the future causes us to miss beautiful, essential crystallizations and crisscrossings

between past and present; the novel ends with Boyd rushing past his old house in a flurry of motion, unwilling to wait long enough for the past to catch up with him: “His life was motion now.... He could not let this place detain him. He went on. Approaching where in another world and time the crossroads had lain he increased his pace, as if someone was pursuing him or as if dark and silent water was already rising to engulf him” (289). Such hastening toward the future without a backward glance will result in the kind of amnesia Kreyling warns against—the kind of utter annihilation of a place and people that Gay foretells in the epilogue. A progress-oriented society will soon fatally suppress narratives like the Bloodworths’, and similar tales of dying and mythical regions that hum with a “dark unmeasured poetry of the woods” will utterly disappear if we do not occasionally glance backward as we move forward, listen to the “ghosts,” and look for them at the crossroads (247).

Conclusion

The Rough South and New Southern Studies: Crossroads and Constellations

Rough South literature has a way of opening and complicating theoretical dialogue about the global South rather than closing it. Southern scholars like Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer who are “interested in the region’s fascinating multiplicity and its participation in hemispheric and global contexts” will find that literature from the Rough South offers intriguing and complicated answers to what they identify as one of the central questions for New Southern Studies: “What are the global gestures in literary texts that we were formerly interpreting as regional or national issues?” (677-8).

This question assumes a particular urgency when we consider the dominant assessment of Rough South literature as unsophisticated, freakish, or comically provincial—judgments that are often based more on the authors’ biographies than on their writing. Authors like Crews, Brown and Gay become victims of stereotyping and prejudice simply because they grew up in poverty in the rural South with little formal education, let alone an M.F.A. Their lack of academic pedigree should not, however, affect our approach to their writing; their work utterly defies the kind of pigeonholing to which Rough South literature and Grit Lit in general are often subjected.

The stark poverty, shocking violence, and grim humor of the Rough South can mask its essentially humanist, often profoundly spiritual, and always globally relevant concerns; but the bareness of its impoverished characters’ lives does not render the fiction itself simple. The Rough South is as postmodern and protean in nature, or in Gretlund’s words, “inscrutable and somehow greater than the sum of the analyzable parts,” as New Southern Studies could desire (5). It may not be the only South, but the

Rough South is a central part of the Southern community whose voice deserves critical recognition. More open dialogue between the Rough South and New Southern Studies will reveal not unbreachable gaps, but a myriad crossroads and convergences—scholars need only trace these points of intersection in order to find a constellation that includes both Rough South and Global South.

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