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Grotesque Masculinities in the Works of Harry Crews, Barry Hannah, and Padgett Powell

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GROTESQUE MASCULINITIES IN THE WORKS OF HARRY CREWS, BARRY HANNAH, AND PADGETT POWELL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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ABSTRACT

“Grotesque Masculinities in the Works of Harry Crews, Barry Hannah, and Padgett Powell” explores how these authors use the grotesque to complicate, distort, and criticize hegemonic white Southern masculinity as represented in contemporary American literature. In “Grotesque Masculinities,” I argue that the presence of the grotesque mode in these author’s works offers a unique critical perspective by which to better understand how masculinity is constructed by and for white Southern men in literature, and how alternative configurations of identity are not only possible, but necessary to decenter whiteness and heteronormativity as dominant categories. Using what sociologists refer to as body-reflexive theory, I argue that grotesque representations of white Southern masculinity in literature may help us conceptualize alternative gender identities for men (and masculine-identified) people in the South and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

This is a study about the ways specific kinds of masculinity are constructed and about *how* those forms are constructed by social practices and bodies, and *why* they're significant both within literary texts and our regional and national culture. This is also a study of the grotesque, a literary mode best defined as the coexistence of two incompatible elements in a state of near-constant tension, a state that, understandably, produces discomfort. Finally, this study is also, in a way, about how all of this--the commingling of the grotesque and masculinities in literature--might enable us to think about masculinities in new ways, particularly by looking at how dominant, hegemonic constructions of gender operate on bodies. At its core, this study examines a specific regional literature of the United States, a specific construction of gender, and specific authors who make frequent and pointed use of the grotesque mode in their literature, and asks: How does it all add up? How can these stories teach us about the ways our culture--local, regional, and national--constructs masculinities, and what other possibilities exist? What might those possibilities look like, and why should anyone care in the first place? In the end, this study is about more than *just* literature. Much like the relationship between social practices and bodies (discussed in greater detail below), stories and bodies influence each other through innumerable dynamics--social, political, aesthetic, and so forth. We're in stories as much as they're in us. Prying the two apart is, at best, semantics.

This study, titled *Grotesque Masculinities*, examines the way three Southern writers--Barry Hannah, Padgett Powell, and Harry Crews, white men who produced the majority of their corpuses from 1970 to 2010--deal with men and masculinities, and

more specifically *white masculinities*, in their stories. These writers also made heavy use of the grotesque mode; in fact, I argue that the grotesque mode, particularly (though not exclusively) the comic grotesque, is the thematic and modal workhorse of their novels and stories, an ever-present and powerful force that, even in the quietest narrative moments, lurks in the background, possibly drooling, waiting to re-emerge, vibrant, weird, and discomfiting. In fact, the prevalence of the grotesque in the works of these authors is why the study revolves around them and, of course, around masculinities: Three white male authors, all making heavy use of the grotesque, all writing, at roughly the same time periods, primarily about men and men's bodies--obsessed, in a way, with depictions of masculine experience, masculine perspective, and masculine embodiment. What results, I argue, is far from expected, and very far indeed from a defense of traditional Southern masculinity.

The above likely provokes a lot of important questions, particularly about the grotesque, about the definition of terms such as masculinity, and about the time period in which the selected authors are writing. But perhaps the most pressing question may be: Why these three authors as opposed to any other? The answer to that question, as we'll see in the sections that follow, is complicated, but here is a simpler, straightforward answer. The decades from 1970 to the present saw tremendous upheaval and cultural change; much of what was once stable and entrenched was, and continues to be, called into question. All three of my writers rose to prominence during this historical period, and all three--as white Southern men who occupy, at least superficially, positions of gender and sexual dominance--have written extensively about men who, at first read, seem very much like their creators, and what may be understood as a large

segment of their intended audience: other straight white Southern men. But the way they have written about this segment of the population, and more specifically, the way they have crafted masculinities in their texts, does not quite fit the bill. To put it one way, when these writers have tackled masculinities in their texts, particularly Southern masculinities (a term I'll unpack below), they *fail* to replicate traditional dominant (hegemonic) forms of masculinity as successful gender identities. Their manly men are shown to be posturing buffoons, their entrepreneurs and self-made businessmen revealed to be clueless shills for companies and organizations that (often literally) suck the life from them, and their attempts to gain political and social dominance over women and other men (in many instances *black* men) is turned against them, casting *them*, and not their targets, as the dominated. These men are often the protagonists of their novels--sometimes one of many--but though they often see themselves as the hero of their respective tales, they fall short.

But to put it another way, rather than perceive these texts as *failing* to produce hegemonic representations of masculinity, they *succeed* at revealing the grotesque, warped dimensions of that very construction, lay it to rest, and offer other, nuanced, and potentially (though, I caution, not always) liberatory, constructions of Southern masculinities--including masculinities not tethered to the male body. That is the approach taken by this study, one I believe is generative, and one that warrants close attention to *these specific authors* with good reason. The authors selected for this study are not the only ones to do this, but they are unique in several ways. First, as white Southern men, all three are nominally part of what this study takes to be (though not without complication) the hegemonic constructions of Southern masculinity, yet all three

reach, I argue, more or less the same conclusions: such constructions are grotesque and other, so-called aberrant, constructions of masculinity are not only possible, but potentially desirable. All three of these authors make heavy use of comedy and the carnivalesque; their texts overflow with linguistic dexterity and hard-boiled satire, absurd and horrifying violence, and surprising tenderness. All three of these authors have been massively influential to other creative writers, but the critical attention paid compared to many of their contemporaries has been scant. What's more, each of these authors asks, in a variety of attitudes, critically and wistfully, longingly and with, at times, intense disdain, the very same question that C. Vann Woodward asked when he wrote if for the Southerner whether "there is really any longer very much point in calling himself a Southerner" (3). This is, in a sense, related to another question, which is, "What even *is* the South?" Much of why this study focuses on *these* specific authors and not others boils down to their willingness--or perhaps compulsion is a better way to put it--to grapple with these questions, to interrogate what a Southern masculinity looks like, or if it even exists in any recognizable form. My selected authors wrestle with what Jon Smith calls the "ambiguous, ambivalent set of alternative modernities," summarized as the idea that "[e]ven if you live in L.A., you probably don't live in the 'L.A.' of the imagination of postmodern geographers; and even if you live in Mt. Airy, North Carolina--Andy Griffith's hometown model for Mayberry--you probably don't live in the South of the imagination of old southern studies. You live in between. And that's okay" (7). That "in between" might be okay, but it is, as Smith points out, an uncomfortable place for many people, and while his book, *Finding Purple America*, deals with that discomfort through the lens of melancholia, this study examines that discomfort as the result of the

grotesque; what Smith does in locating American cultural studies in a shifting field of “alternative modernities,” I seek to do with masculinities in Southern fiction.

While I discuss the grotesque at length below, I want to emphasize that the mode--and not necessarily the regional or gender similarities between the authors--is the glue that binds them in this study. Why did these three authors make such extensive use of the mode, and why do so with the same focus (men and men’s gender identities)? What about their use of the grotesque helped them find similar results in deconstructing Southern masculinities? What socio-political and cultural forces inspired these authors, and how are they handled in the texts? What, then, do these texts have to say about how we construct masculinities, about gender as a whole, and about ourselves? These are some, but certainly not all, of the questions that drive this study of three unique, massively influential authors, all of whom write about the same thing around the same times, and all of whom make extensive use of the grotesque to do it.

Goals and Context

To better contextualize this study, and to ground it historically and position it within a larger field of discourse, I offer the following considerations. First, I see this study as a companion to (and as clearly and heavily influenced by) Patricia Yaeger’s excellent book *Dirt and Desire*, a work whose structure informed much of the work found here. Where Yaeger’s goal is to update scholarship on the fiction of Southern women and draw attention to the ways in which whiteness has dominated the discourse of Southern writing (a lesson I do not ignore in this study), *Grotesque Masculinities* focuses on examining constructions of masculinity in the works of three contemporary (here defined as post-Vietnam, post Women’s Lib) male writers of the South and their

use of the grotesque mode to draw attention to white Southern masculinities. Much of this study is based on the belief that it is important to analyze the works of men who, like the vast majority of their characters, occupy, at least nominally, a position of social and gender dominance so that we might better understand how such dominance is, even if only in fiction, constructed--and ultimately subverted. This project looks mainly at white masculine identities because such identities are, and have been, at the center of dominant social, political, and cultural social practices in the U.S. South; understanding such hegemonic masculinities is central to projects that seek to re-evaluate, critique, and deconstruct what white masculinities in the South--and beyond--mean in the first place. Within my selected texts, we see not only how the dominant configure the dominated, we see how they configure themselves. In other words, we see what Raewyn Connell calls "masculinity-in-relation . . . configurations of practice structured by gender relations. They are inherently historical; and their making and unmaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change" (44). Configurations of masculinity are inherently political and social, and they are generated and constituted not only at the personal level (within the individual), but at the level of the social (social practices). How exactly this all occurs and what results from it are of prime importance in this study.

As noted above, the authors chosen for this study have a lot in common. In unique, often conflicting ways, these authors all make extensive use of the grotesque mode, and their works, often simultaneously hilarious and disturbing, are themselves nodes of discomfort on the American literary landscape, paginated goose bumps that, despite widespread critical acclaim, have often confounded critics and scholars. Some

of this is evident from the relative dearth of scholarship found on these authors. Aside from Ruth Weston's excellent *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, and articles by scholars such as Martyn Bone, Scott Romine, and Kenneth Seib, very little attention has been paid to his sustained use of the grotesque. Crews has received, all in all, more critical attention, though much of it in the vein of historicism focused on his seminal autobiography, *A Childhood: Biography of a Place*. About Powell there has been far less critical inquiry--a scant few reviews, then nothing. There has, to date, never been a work that examines all three authors in one place, nor has there been a work that examines their common focal points--men, masculinity, and the grotesque--and nothing that contextualizes their simultaneous contributions to national and regional discourses on gender and identity. *Grotesque Masculinities* seeks to change that.

My goals with *Grotesque Masculinities* are as follows. First, I seek to revitalize discussion of these authors and to connect them in new or seldom-discussed ways to contemporary critical discourses of gender, the grotesque, and national and regional identity. Next, I seek to explore their works in new and productive ways that, rather than brush off or rehabilitate their most offensive elements, confront them, and locate within those elements the dissonance necessary for theoretical and material nuance and alternatives. In doing so, it is my goal that *Grotesque Masculinities* explores how these novels use the grotesque to work toward a more complicated idea of contemporary Southern masculinity--through the death throes, if you will, of traditional, normative Southern masculinity--and beyond to new configurations and possibilities not restricted to white Southern men.

My argument about the works of these authors is simple: In their use of the grotesque mode, these novels complicate the ability to define, much less cohere, a stable white Southern masculinity that aligns with hegemonic models. Even when deployed to reify a dominant position, the presence of the grotesque in their works draws attention to something aberrant within the dominant configuration, a deviant tell that has *always* been there. In turn, that redirects our attention to alternative potential configurations of masculine identity, and in doing so, reveals precisely *how* dominant positions are constructed. Although the goal of this study is not necessarily to espouse a liberatory or progressive politics of engagement with social and critical theory, I do hope to encourage such readings of the texts in question, and to show the grotesque mode's potential in such endeavors. Ultimately, I want people to consider masculinity and the grotesque in ways largely absent from contemporary literary criticism, and for readers outside academia to gain an understanding about the ways in which literature and real life intersect and shape each other.

The Grotesque Mode

At the center of this study is the grotesque, a mode with a unique relationship to American literature, and especially literature written in, about, and by authors hailing from the South. The grotesque pervades many of our most celebrated works and authors: the uncomfortable, liminal characters of Carson McCullers's work; Jason Compson, Bon, Henry Bon, Flem Snopes, or numerous other characters from Faulkner; the Misfit, Manley Pointer, or Hazel Motes, or any of the countless gnarled denizens of Flannery O'Connor's stories; the works of William Styron, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Dorothy Allison, and numerous others. Readers might be tempted to say

there is something uniquely attractive about the grotesque to the American literary landscape, but another, more telling way to think about it is to say that there may very well be something truly, uniquely grotesque about America, its history, its cultural landscape, and its particular knack for institutionalizing, and subverting, norms--and at times, for doing both simultaneously.

Not that the grotesque has ever been much concerned with the norm. If anything, the grotesque has always been a mode--that is, a method or principle that guides a work but is not inherent in the medium or genre. The grotesque is a mode of revelation; at every turn, it reveals something, often that which is hidden, and that word, "reveals," is important because it helps to define the grotesque as a mode of revelation, one that, as Leonard Cassuto puts it, "is born of the violation of categories" (6). The grotesque reveals the world that has always existed, but not necessarily the one we want, and almost certainly *not* the world to which we have grown accustomed, and Bernard McElroy's assertion that the grotesque reveals "not the world as we know it to be, but...as we fear it might be" underlines this revelatory power (11). As a literary mode, the grotesque's primary function is to reveal something about the world around us whether or not we want to see what it reveals. In doing so, it ends up revealing something about ourselves, showing us how we, too, violate traditional, or dominant, boundaries and "categories." If the grotesque shows us something about the world that's difficult to swallow, what it shows us about ourselves is significantly harder to handle.

That explains well enough what the grotesque does as a literary mode, but what is it in the first place? Philip Thompson defines the grotesque as "the unresolved clash

of incompatibles, one of which is some form of the comic, and also as the ambivalently abnormal” (29). His definition emphasizes the “abnormal” qualities of the grotesque, a term that, when taken with the above discussion of the grotesque’s penchant for showing us things we would rather not see, highlights the mode’s primary function: to generate discomfort. For Mary Russo, as for many others, this discomfort is rooted in the physical body, and she connects the two when she writes that “the grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm” (11). Though Russo’s concern is primarily in connecting how women and femininity have been represented through the grotesque, she’s absolutely right in pointing out the importance of the body as the target, the “category” of the grotesque mode, for where else is discomfort felt if not in the body?

The Grotesque Body

Similar to scholarship on the grotesque, the connection between the grotesque and the body didn’t begin with Mikhail Bakhtin, but it’s safe to say, with nods to Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, and Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, that Bakhtin is where both came into their own. His masterpiece, *Rabelais and His World*, is, aside from being beautifully written and often very funny, a thorough and generous treatise on the grotesque, and more importantly, a lengthy analysis on the nature of the relationship between the grotesque and the human body. He writes: “Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, complete unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). The grotesque, as a mode of the flesh, is a mode of “transgression,” and here we return to Cassuto’s assertion about the nature of the mode, its imperative

to violate basic categories, or, as Geoffrey Harpham puts it, the grotesque's ability to disrupt the mind's systems of classification (4). Through its violation of systems of classifications, its disruption to stability and function, and its embrace of the abnormal and alien, all in the service of producing discomfort, the grotesque is, ultimately, a mode of the abnormal body, a body poised to reveal the world "as we fear it to be."

Some of this "fear" and discomfort generated by the grotesque results from what it shows us about our bodies. The grotesque captures the liminal, shifting quality of bodily experience, that uncanny mix of the comical and terrifying that accompanies our daily life trapped in bodies that, at every moment, no matter how much pride or loathing we put into them, no matter how much stoic care or hedonistic abandon with which we treat them, are steadily decaying. The grotesque is a mode that explores the constant tension of two simultaneous incompatibles, life and death, laughter and horror, and in doing so, causes discomfort. In turn, this discomfort forces a reaction. Many reactions are possible, but the ones upon which I focus are inquiry and revelation; the uncomfortable individual may ask, "What precisely is making me uncomfortable and why?" The answers to these questions, as I hope to reveal over the course of my dissertation, peel back the surfaces of those various systems of knowledge and power, those superstructures of culture and society that, when examined on the macro scale, we will call social practices, to reveal the fundamental elements from which they are constructed. The goal for doing this is simple: The more we see, first-hand, the world "as we fear it to be," the better we are able to see *how* that world--and the world as it *appears to be*--were constructed in the first place. And the more we emphasize the grotesque as a mode that deals with *people*, the more we emphasize the stakes.

A study of the grotesque is not simply about bodies and literature, power structures and social practices, but our human place within them, and around them, beneath them, and above them. More importantly, the grotesque allows us to see nuance, complication, and transformation--the movement, segmented and incomplete in transition, toward *something else*. Bakhtin describes the grotesque image as “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming . . . Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body” (24-26). As will become apparent in this study, my selected authors, in addition to a myopic focus on masculinity, are also laser focused on similar themes: transformation, death, birth, and a state of incompleteness. The grotesque is, in a sense, *all of this at once*, and the resultant discomfort allows us to see two our world from two polemical opposites: There is the world as we tend to perceive it, and there is a different world, the one we fear is real. Another way to put it is to say that the grotesque draws our attention outward *and* inward, and asks us to re-examine ourselves *and* our world, because something about them both has made us uneasy. The grotesque makes us uncomfortable because there’s something real about it, something *too* real to ignore, and that something is not new or novel. It has, the grotesque tells us, always been there.

In this way, the grotesque helps us understand how our bodies--how *we*--fit into dominant discourses of power. In the scope of this study, the dominant position, whether politically, socially, or culturally, has been occupied by white men in the United States because they and they alone were allowed to be considered subjects--people.

This is the true power of the dominant discourse--the ability to control and shape discourse in such a way that prevents other bodies from being recognized as subjects, to control who gets to be *human*. It is precisely within that discourse of power that the grotesque is at its most powerful and revelatory; it is there, within the dominant discourse, that the grotesque disrupts the stability and coherence of the dominant over the dominated through its ability to generate discomfort *and direct that discomfort upon various bodies*.

Discomfort and the Grotesque

From time to time, the grotesque is deployed by dominant power structures as a weapon, something Cassuto points out in saying that the grotesque is a “study of the relation between dominant and dominated” (xvii). Cassuto’s book, *The Inhuman Race*, deals with this at length, focusing on the grotesque objectification of African Americans in antebellum literature. Despite this, Cassuto never wavers to point out the subversive power of the mode, claiming that “the grotesque is a threat to the system of knowledge by virtue of its liminal position within that system” (xvii). Like Cassuto, I argue that even when deployed by dominant power structures, the grotesque nevertheless undermines such structures through its liminal position and its continuous generation of discomfort, a sensation that, much like disgust, destabilizes the ideological potency of the object (or social practice) in question.

This makes the grotesque particularly amenable to certain theoretical approaches, particularly those that examine the sociological or psychological interaction between social practices and the constitution of masculine selfhood (subjectivity) and identity, those that criticize macro- and micro-scale methods of organization, and those

that seek to understand or uncover the ways in which people react, consciously or otherwise, to other people. I ground my analysis first and foremost by asking how the grotesque functions with respect to constructions of Southern masculinity in my selected texts, how it distorts bodies, spaces, and social practices, how it produces discomfort, and how interrogating the source of that discomfort reveals a different “world as we fear it to be” about masculinities and their configurations in the South. As this is meant to be, ultimately, a generative work, one meant to encourage renewed interest in the grotesque and spark continued study of these authors, I approach the texts in what I hope is a positive frame of mind: problematic as some of these stories, and perhaps the authors, may be, they are nonetheless capable of revealing to us more about the world than we may be prepared to know; what’s more, the grotesque is often turned upon dominant or hegemonic constructions of masculinity in these stories, showing how they, and not alternative (deviant, aberrant) constructions are the true grotesque objects. That said, I do not suggest that the most problematic elements of these texts--incidents of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and more--should be ignored; rather, I suggest that such incidents, when contextualized by the grotesque, are capable of (though not always successful at) turning critical scrutiny upon themselves, upon their sources, ultimately undermining the power structures and social practices that make them possible in the first place.

Grotesque Articulation and Intervention

Much of the power of the grotesque lies in revelation and recognition, in locating within the grotesque the precise source of discomfort, the result of an encounter with the disgusting, or the uncanny, or the flat-out terrifying, while also encountering

something incompatible--lust, or the mundane, or the deeply comedic. And like disgust, the grotesque elicits a tangible, material reaction in the body. We recoil *in* disgust. We retch, we barf, we run away. That which makes us uncomfortable approaches and we reposition, and in that moment of repositioning, something else happens: we *reconfigure*. Who and what we were, much like *where* we were *before* discomfort trotted over, is altered. Even if we stand our ground and allow the object of our discomfort to inch closer, we are changed.

These micro-moments of awareness and recognition are one of the central concerns of the project. But what results from their analysis--reconfiguration--is the real goal of this study. Reconfiguration is the process of naming the source of grotesque discomfort, of confronting the *object* of our discomfort, the thing that pushes us toward transformation, and it is much more than a moment of bodily experience--it is also a moment of subjective reconfiguration; the subject's awareness "occupies a gap or interval," a "narrative of emergent comprehension" (Harpham 15), and what occurs in that "gap," that "interval," is the "emergent comprehension" wherein the dominant social practices--the ones that delineate the terms of normativity, of disgust, of change--are exposed *in relation* to the dominated. I argue this triggers a moment of recursive awareness in which the observer perceives both self and other as moving between two states: subject and object. Katarzyna Smyczynska reminds us of the importance materiality plays in this process of critical emergent comprehension, noting the "body's essential role in the human condition . . . the body is the essential medium through which moral values and social norms . . . circulate to gain social legitimacy" (220). As the grotesque causes discomfort, we enter into a moment of emergent subjective

reconstitution--we are, after all, the “medium”--and within this process we see ourselves, as we see others, as both subject and object. We are both the individual who sees and recognizes, and the one who is seen from afar, the object that is both recognizably human and objectified other. The grotesque is, in short, a dialectic of subject-object, but a thriftier way of putting it is this: The grotesque is the dialectic of the human condition.

So, while we’re barfing and running away, or standing there and taking it on the chin, a recognition of the grotesque changes who and what we are. It shifts us to a liminal mode of self, a state of tension between the dialectical poles. We articulate, achieving within the dialectical tension a new subject position. I call this “grotesque articulation,” a term I use to refer to the bodily and subjective reconfiguration that occurs as a result of engaging the source of grotesque discomfort. Grotesque articulation is a new awareness of the self, of the way the self can be coded and configured by dominant power structures and social practices as either subject or object, and sometimes--and this is the truly grotesque part--*as both at the same time*. It is also an awareness of how one’s body is read by others, how it is decoded, deconstructed, and, more importantly, the rules and guidelines by which this decoding and deconstruction takes place. Grotesque articulation is as much about articulating the self into a new subject position as it is about recognizing how others read us as subject *and* object. In this way, my approach to the grotesque and its ability to intervene and articulate is similar to the way Judith Butler describes “recognition” as the reflection, but not destruction or conflation, of subject and object in an individual’s psyche. In fact, I argue that Butler’s “recognition” is precisely what happens as a result of (though not exclusive to) grotesque articulation (what happens when we encounter the source of discomfort in

the grotesque and recognize ourselves as both subject and object in relation to it and others).

Grotesque articulation is movement in liminality, toward and away from the source of grotesque discomfort. Ultimately, it reveals for the individual a multiplicity of potential points of what Mary Russo calls “hidden culture contents,” nodes of slippage that call into question dominant signs, signifiers, and, of course, entire chains of signification (8-9). At the end of the process of grotesque articulation, there is a realization that extends beyond oneself: we articulate into a new subject position, but in doing so, we begin to articulate others. This is the crux of what I call “grotesque intervention,” the moment in which a grotesque body recontextualizes the world around it--and more specifically, exerts pressure upon social practices. Through grotesque articulation, a person is reconfigured, and in the process--what Bakhtin calls a “re-orientation”--the grotesque body affects others; the gaze is not simply reflected, but re-directed onto other bodies that suddenly, and without warning, no longer seem so comfortable. If grotesque articulation is about how our bodies change and shift in discomfort, grotesque intervention is about how that articulation helps us change other bodies.

A simpler way to put it is this: Grotesque articulation is what we go through when we encounter the grotesque, but grotesque intervention is what we do to others, to the larger world around us, and more specifically, to the social practices that shape people. And a good way to summarize my project is to say that I’m analyzing how masculine bodies deal with grotesque articulation and what kinds of grotesque intervention they enact on other bodies via social practices.

Hegemonic Masculinities

While the grotesque is a mode of the flesh (Bakhtin 19-20), it is, I argue, also a mode of *how* bodies are configured via social practices. My focus lies in how gender, specifically masculinity as expressed upon and by Southern men, both assists in the shaping of social practices, and is, in turn, shaped by them. In keeping with Cassuto's notion of the grotesque as a study of "dominant and dominated," my argument about these authors is that they're writing about dominant Southern masculinity in transition-- about characters who, through negotiating social forces or personal circumstances, begin to scrutinize their own constructions of Southern masculinity, constructions that, though they once seemed stable and cohesive, have failed to cohere. In that moment of crisis, they encounter something within themselves previously ignored, repressed, denied, or subsumed, and there they encounter something unaccounted for, something that both attracts and repulses them, something that begs them to look deeper. They encounter the grotesque, experience moments of grotesque articulation, and perform acts of grotesque intervention on the world around them.

This study examines the ways in which my authors work through this sense of crisis and the resultant encounter with the grotesque (both within themselves and within the world around them), how they process the impending realization that their dominance cannot and will not continue unchallenged, and how, through that process, they begin to formulate potential approaches to new constructions of Southern masculinity. Though these texts are written by (and feature) men who identify with, dominant constructions of masculinity, they nonetheless turn a critical eye upon those

very constructions, and, with the help of the grotesque, explore alternatives to dominant models of gender and subjectivity, and draw attention to the relationship between those models and social practices. I want to stress the importance of the plural in the words “models” and “constructions” above to emphasize that masculinity is far from a single, cohesive gender identity. Alex Hobbs discusses this and the importance of men’s studies when he writes:

If age is a critically overlooked cultural marker, so too is masculinity . . . Rather than reinforce patriarchy (or bemoan its demise, as the men’s rights movement does), men’s studies seeks to explode the myth that men in general benefit from it and celebrates a multiplicity of masculine identities over socially imbedded stereotypes. Men’s studies endeavors to dispel the notion that there is a single masculinity and set of masculine attributes attached to it that form acceptable male behavior. (xii-xiii)

Like Hobbs, my goal is to approach my authors and their texts in order to suss out a “multiplicity of masculine identities,” to find out how the grotesque makes them visible, and to think about what they offer as an alternative to hegemonic (patriarchal) constructions.

But to understand what these texts work to uncover--the potential alternative constructions of Southern masculinity they explore--I want to define what they contrast, specifically hegemonic masculinity is constituted on national and regional (Southern) level. Sociologist Michael Messner writes that “[h]egemonic masculinity, the currently dominant and ascendant form of masculinity, is constructed as not-feminine, but also simultaneously not-gay, not-black, not-working class, and not-migrant” (314).

Hegemonic masculinity is, then, white heterosexist masculinity, a particular gender construction elevated above the working class by virtue of education, wealth, privilege, or some combination of all three factors. It is dominant in the sense that it has, for quite

some time, dominated the social, political, and cultural processes that in turn control, through legislation, cultural pressure, and other means, social practices--the ways in which discourse (in the Foucaultian sense) is put into actions that influence, and are influenced by, bodies. In other words, hegemonic masculinity dominates through its ability to legitimize or de-legitimize other bodies, other genders, and other constructions of masculinity (and femininity). Its dominance is not, of course, unchallenged, either in praxis or theory, but neither has it yet been dethroned; that emerging alternative constructions of masculinity are discussed as such is, in a sense, proof that a hegemonic form exists, maintains a dominant position, and exercises power.

Manhood and the Origins of Masculinity

To understand what hegemonic masculinity is, it helps to look at it from a historical perspective. Masculinity is, by all accounts, a fairly recent term, originating in the 1890s as the middle-class male antithesis to other designations: “sissy,” “stuffed shirt,” and “pussy-foot” (Bederman 17). Firmly rooted in middle-class sensibilities, masculinity was, in part, developed to emphasize the ways in which middle class men were distinct from, and superior to, other men; in a sense, masculinity, was unique to the middle class (and above) white men¹, even if other male gender identities were available to lower class men. But if masculinity was formed as a classed, racial response to other men, it also began the way all masculinities, regardless of circumstance, began. R.W. Connell tells us that masculinities are formed in two ways. The first is a “local gender order,” a localized ordering of gender that generally conforms

¹ Bederman notes that the discourse of “civilization” was used to consolidate masculinity as white, particularly with regards to the idea of “savagery” and its use to connote inferiority among non-white populations (27). She writes, “Civilization thus constructed manliness as simultaneously cultural and racial” (29).

to a specific community's power structures, and the second is through "transnational arenas," a term that describes the intersection and subsequent interaction of different local gender orders via international contact (72). While this study is more concerned with the former (local gender orders), I want to note that transnational arenas complicate gender orders in ways that may not be readily apparent. One could argue, for example, that a "transatlantic masculinity" emerged in the early twentieth century, particularly at the close of World War I, and made a significant impact on the ways that local gender orders thereafter organized. But it's the micro level interactions that interest me, the potential of transnational arenas, as a concept that encompasses the transgression of established spaces and orders, to generate new masculinities domestically--within the established borders of, for example, the United States, or, to narrow it further, within different local (regional) gender orders.

In fact, I argue that this very thing has occurred--and continues to occur--within our very borders. When discussing how masculinities developed historically, E. Anthony Rotundo notes that there have been three distinct phases, each with its own unique conception of maleness (2-7). "Communal manhood" linked male identity to the duties performed for a community's well-being, and tied a man's, and his family's, value to the ways in which service could be performed to raise the value of his community. By the late mid nineteenth century, the growth of capitalism shifted communal manhood into "self-made manhood," a gender identity focused on self-interest and an increasing reticence to take part in domestic affairs that, gradually, came to be thought of as the purview of women. More than communal manhood, elements of self-made manhood persist in contemporary constructions of masculinity, commingled with the third phase of

manhood, “passionate manhood,” in which the male body and its unique biological characteristics became the focal point for consolidating masculine identity. Passionate manhood took the self-interest of self-made manhood a step further, emphasizing the worth and value of one’s passions and desires as experienced within the male body as *the* essential component of manhood.

As this emphasis on the body and its passions was strengthened, so too was the notion that the male body, as the seat of such passions, embodied (literally) the correct way of experiencing and processing passion--and ultimately, the correct way of expressing and moderating passion, too. Rotundo notes that with the rise of the middle class association with masculinity, the male body became synonymous with “character--they treated physical strength and strength of character as the same thing” (223). In this way, the transnational arena of gender was, in fact, a transhistorical arena, a meeting of manhood, class, and race, that produced something new (masculinity), reified it, and rooted it in the male body, a place where, Connell reminds us, “the effects of these processes appear at the most intimate level” (81). Men’s bodies are not simple conduits through which social processes and practices are expressed, but actual sites of ideological embodiment, sites in which masculinity is constituted, cohered, expressed, and sometimes contested. Dominant or hegemonic constructions, then, embody--literally--the power to control the discourse of legitimate gender identity.

You will have noticed some slippage in number--masculinity here, masculinit^y/es there--and that is deliberate; in the plurality of gender orders, there likewise exists a plurality of masculinities, some of which constitute in direct opposition to the hegemonic form, and some of which I address in the analysis of literature to follow. But it’s also

worth noting at this juncture that despite my emphasis on masculinities and the male body, neither of these are constituted in a vacuum. As Connell points out, “Masculinities do not first exist and then come into contact with femininities. Masculinities and femininities are produced together in the process that constitutes a gender order” (72). In order for masculinities to emerge and cohere via social practices, they require the presence of femininities, equally numerous and, it must be noted, equally susceptible to parsing out into hierarchies. Much as there is a hegemonic masculinity, there is a hegemonic femininity, and if this study is not focused on the latter that has little to do with the way it is embodied. I mean that literally: masculinities, as Jack Halberstam reminds us, *must not* be thought to be inextricably linked to “the male body and its effects” (1). Her book, *Female Masculinity*, offers insight into the ways masculinities and the male body can be uncoupled from one another, and shows us how female masculinities reveal how “masculinity is constructed as masculinity” (1). If this study focuses mainly on men, male bodies, and their particular constructions of masculinity, it’s not because there is something inherently *male* about them, but because they operate within or on the periphery of, hegemonic masculinity, and either illuminate something new about the construction or--and sometimes, *also*--critique it.

In this way, I attempt to always keep in mind what Connell notes when he writes that masculinity “as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation . . . and their making and unmaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change” (44). By viewing and analyzing masculinity-in-relation, I keep the focus on masculinities as both the results of social practices *and* as objects capable of affecting social practices. The reason for this is simple:

masculinities, hegemonic or otherwise, are embodied in bodies, and as Connell reminds us, bodies “cannot be understood as a neutral medium of social practice. Their materiality matters” (58). What Connell is getting at, and what I am trying to emphasize, is that an analysis of masculinities is, at its core, an analysis of how social practices have shaped a gender identity, how that gender identity has been embodied, and how that body has, in turn, acted upon social practices.

Body Reflexive Theory

Of course, seeing the social practices that, in part, make us who and what we are, is rarely a pleasant process. It can also be, as Cassuto’s study of the antebellum objectification of African Americans points out, destructive, deployed to monstrous effect upon dominated groups. Even then, however, I argue that it is nonetheless a destabilizing presence, one that works, ultimately, toward the disruption and distortion of dominant narratives and social practices of embodiment and objectification. This is particularly true of the grotesque, a mode for which discomfort is the nexus of (re)action. For this reason, my approach is ultimately recuperative, and I argue that the grotesque is at its strongest within ideological frameworks that flourish by muscling out the competition, so to speak, precisely because it calls attention to the ways in which such ideologies construct stability and strength. By this I mean that the presence and effects of the grotesque are most pronounced in ideological frameworks that seek to establish dominance, frameworks in which the dominant attempt to leverage social, political, and aesthetic power over the dominated. But to address my specific focus--grotesque masculinities, men’s bodies--I ground my study by incorporating body-reflexive theory, described by Connell as a practice “in which bodies are addressed by social process

and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs, or positions in discourse. Their materiality . . . is not erased, it continues to matter” (64-65). Body-reflexive theory calls attention to the ways that people are configured by social processes, those macro-level configurations of social practices. As social practices and processes shape bodies, and as bodies in turn shape social practices and processes, new configurations of gender are generated in moments of dissonance and friction. For that reason, this analysis borrows Connell’s definition of gender as “a way in which social practice is ordered” to both embrace the material (lived bodily experience) of gender and its abstract expression in social practice. In this theoretical framework, hegemonic masculinity is only as stable and dominant as its ability to be disseminated from, and back into, social practices *as a dominant form*. At its core, body-reflexive theory maintains that social practices shape bodies while bodies *simultaneously* shape social practices, and that a constant awareness of this back-and-forth tension between the two is necessary to properly contextualize a study of both.

Given this dialectical tension, body-reflexive theory lends itself well to a study of the grotesque. As the grotesque draws our attention inward (discomfort, articulation), then outward to other bodies (intervention), the dominant social processes that have acted upon both sets of bodies become visible--or, at the very least, significantly more susceptible to scrutiny. If the grotesque is the underlying dialectic of subject and object as we experience it, body-reflexive theory urges us to consider these bodies in tension with larger, social-level objects, and then to examine how that tension changes both. Ultimately, body-reflexive theory mediates the movement from grotesque articulation to grotesque intervention by first helping us to see our bodies as subject/objects in tension

with other bodies and social practices, and then by showing how those other bodies and social practices likewise experience articulation and intervention.

The South, Southernness, and Southern Masculinity

While the above discussion broadly defines masculinities in the national context of American literature and culture, I want to hone in on the idea of Southern masculinity, and more specifically ask: What exactly *is* a Southern man and how would my authors have approached the idea? What is Southern masculinity? For that matter, how is the South defined in this study? To begin, Southern masculinity is, Trent Watts reminds us, the opposite of what is feminine or black, and thus, obviously, white and masculine (3), but while these terms offer a baseline for what we might call “normative” Southern masculinity, it’s worth noting that they fail to define anything other than *the most visibly* dominant group, a surface configuration that fails to explain what, precisely, makes a southern man a *man*. Watt compounds this by adding sexuality into the configuration: “Perhaps, then, the most fundamental message that southern culture seems to deliver about manhood is that the southern man is presumed to be heterosexual” (13). But even this, we learn, is far from a cohesive picture; “The one great taboo,” Watt writes in discussing the frequency of homosocial and, from time to time, homosexual contact between Southern men, particularly in the nominally masculine realm of sports, “has been that of public declaration of love for another man” (13). The thin, often porous divide between the public and the private graduates the aberrant to the “taboo,” but still fails to provide a coherent, totalizing configuration of masculinity. It’s not gay, except sometimes, and only privately, and only if it’s (sort of) white.

If, based on the above, Southern masculinity sounds awfully similar to hegemonic masculinity, that's because it is--for the most part, anyway. Things get more complicated when we factor regionalism into the equation, and significant attention will be paid to how national and regional exceptionalism intersect with gender and the grotesque, particularly when analyzing Crews's *The Knockout Artist*. For the present, I distinguish the South as a region made distinct from other regions, and a composite national character, through various narratives of otherness. Richard Gray puts it succinctly: The "South *is* what the North *is not*, just as the *North* is what the *South* is not" (500). But within that distinction, we might locate certain moments of social and cultural pressure that further distinguish what it means to be a Southern man. For example, Ted Ownby notes that "white southern culture in the late nineteenth century had displayed a profound tension between a hell-raising aggressiveness located wherever men gathered away from home and an evangelical culture centered in the home and church that stressed harmony, self control, and the special religious virtues of women" (371-372). In the larger transition from self-made manhood to passionate manhood, Southern masculinity was, in large part, defined by this specific tension, between the "hell-raising" that took place away from home, and the life of "harmony" and "self-control" present in domestic life. By the mid to late twentieth century, this tension had largely dispersed into regional stereotypes and caricatures such as (but not limited to) the "helluvafella," the hard-drinking, hard-loving, fist-fighting rebel, or the cowboy of the American West who represented for Southern men "an appealingly safe form of violence" (378). For white Southern men, contemporary masculine identity is heavily influenced by acceptable outlets for masculine expression--drinking, violence,

and acts of rebellion against some distinguished other, a separate body of culture and identity--for example, the North.

Very often, this drive to distinguish a regional Southern identity is driven by an attempt to reconcile the present with the past, a desire to create a historical narrative that arrives in some concretely defined *now*. Robert Jackson touches on this when he writes that “American history has been plagued by competing and often tangled cultural narratives from its very beginning, narratives whose existence complicates any gesture toward constructing a pastoral or utopian vision of the past” (6). While Jackson emphasizes this historical narrative as a means of distinguishing American culture from European culture, I argue that it also applies to the ways in which regions, such as the South, seek to create divergent historical narratives that distinguish them from other national cultures and identities. The nature of this Southern narrative--the historical transposition of the South as a regional and cultural identity--takes many forms. Jackson notes the importance of Faulkner, whose emphasis on “regional transposition and the critical connections among region, race, and identity” (68) defines the South as something that fails to align with, say, the Agrarians; vision of the South--or more specifically, a singular and specific Southernness. As Jackson points out, for Faulkner, “[t]he figure of the region serves in his work as a bridge between the seemingly disparate antimodern South of his origin and the aggressively modernist narrative modes that enable him to exploit the moral and humanistic possibilities of southern identity for his fiction” (86). Less concerned with pinning the South down in concrete terms, Faulkner’s modernist approach provides us with a critical vision of the South, one in which the grand antebellum narratives of the Agrarians--or any singular narrative of

the region, for that matter--are scrutinized, an approach that encourages a view of the South as a region and culture in flux, transitory, between its unique socio-political nodes of culture and conflict (economically, racially, politically, and so on). It is, in short, a vision of the South that embraces a distinction precipitated on unique interactions with the larger American historical narrative.

Much as Faulkner was content to embrace instability and change, Jackson notes that Flannery O'Connor's vision of the South was bound up in a sense of indeterminacy. About her work, Jackson describes a key facet of her fictions, "a certain faith that asking the question, without forcing it to provide too definitive an answer in any single gesture or moment, exemplifies the human subject's healthiest, most natural and fruitful relationship with creation" (101). If O'Connor's work seeks an answer, it is derived holistically from disparate elements, and it distinguishes itself, much as Southern regionalism distinguishes itself in her work, via a dialectical representation, the most powerful and common of which is the individual and the larger community (111). For O'Connor, Jackson tells us, the "isolated souls" and their ability (or inability) to meaningfully engage with their community, represents a "sense of the South as a region . . . linked to the fundamental American problem of the individual's place in society" (111-1112). Though it is worth noting that surely much of this attests to O'Connor's religious views and the emphasis on an individual's ability to achieve grace and redemption in the midst of a society that has largely given up such pursuits, I'm far more interested in her representation of the South as a region that acutely expresses the tension between a subject and the larger society--or, in the case of this study, of a body and social practices. Both Faulkner and O'Connor locate within Southern culture and

identity a unique set of relations and emphases while also refusing simple narratives of exceptionalism and singularity. Their Souths, like the Souths of Crews, Hannah, and Powell, are sites of indeterminacy, of constant shifting perceptions of identity, regional, gendered, and otherwise. The Souths of my authors are very often focused on the conflict between the individual, the influence of the past on the present, and their place(s) in the larger American cultural landscape(s). Any attempt to pin the South down to a single thing or deciding factor is doomed, but that's all right. As Hannah once said in an interview, "You become eloquent in defeat" (39).

While the above illustrates in part how literary constructions of the South and Southern identity evolved from Faulkner and O'Connor (though by no means are they the sole originators or contributors) to Crews, Hannah, and Powell, it also helps to further define this study's stance on the South as a region, a historical narrative, and a site for the generation of cultural--and more specifically, masculine--identity. To that end, I maintain that the South is, as Jennifer Rae Greeson notes, a term that originated "out of the discourse of modern empire . . . first and foremost an ideological concept rather than a place" (10). Rather than locate in my selected authors or their works some essential "southernness" that codes masculinity in exceptional ways, I see masculinity as, in part, coded by the social practices that convey "southernness." In short, I view the South as a regional identity, and southernness as an aspect of that identity, and the combined pair are both results of, and contributors to, social practices that help constitute other more complicated identities and ideologies. Like Greeson, I see the construction of the South as the complicated result of imaginative (literary) frameworks (11-12), and major social and economic processes, many of which, from a

contemporary standpoint, can be traced back to the failure of the federal government to commit to Reconstruction (255-256). I'm also inclined to agree that "Southernness" eventually became a kind of commodity, one emboldened by "the great era of capitalist consolidation in the United States, which had been made possible by the economic expansion of the war itself" (255). Empire, in the context of the South, refers not only to antebellum aristocratic hierarchies or the pervasive and requisite use of chattel slavery to sustain plantation economies, but the destruction of an old order of social practices for new ones, and the organization of them according to capitalist demands. The economic forces that shape and distinguish a region also work to define it *as a part of the larger nation*, to lend a distinct identity to a place (and time), or, as Greeson puts it, the South as "rightfully ours because it is part of the United States" while also "ours in subjection or thrall because it is apart" (9).

Greeson's influential work ultimately thinks ahead, from the antebellum South to the present, about "how that nation projects power externally into the world" (15). Where my project differs from Greeson's, and how it potentially contributes to ongoing discussions about the intersection of gender and regionalism, is that it looks in the opposite direction--how a region, and more specifically, a convergence of many social practices within that region, project power *inward*, into bodies, and how those bodies in turn shape social practices. That distinction is important, both to situate my work in the larger discourse about the South and Southernness, and to frame my work as distinct to contemporary fiction and the grotesque. Where Greeson's work, among others, critically examines how Southern essentialism was originally configured, mine looks ahead to a kind of breaking point, a time when Southern fiction, as Matthew Guinn notes, seeks

“not continuity but discontinuity” (xi). Like Guinn, I believe this is a conscious search, one that originates in contemporary Southern writers who seek to “puncture the ideology that construes the region as a cultural Eden, a sort of literary Solid South” (xii). Guinn’s term for this purposeful interrogation and deconstruction of (supposed) Southern coherence is “mythoclasm,” and here I amend the term to include an interrogation of masculinity as configured in the South, a masculinity about which, like the region in which it is assembled (and from which it projects power) there is no universal consensus. The masculinities of the South, like the South itself, are subject to Guinn’s “discontinuity,” and what this project seeks to examine is how the grotesque impacts those dissonant contact points between the various social practices that construct masculinities and their depictions in contemporary Southern literature.

There is, however, the risk of too much abstraction. Many critical sources, such as those named above, discuss the South and Southernness in solely theoretical terms, ignoring, at least in their initial premise, what Michael Kreyling asks us to keep in mind: “The myth and the history feed one another; together they make consciousness a process, and we are in it, body and mind” (xviii). What Kreyling emphasizes is that for all the discussion about the South as a constructed abstract entity of thought, or a convergence of social practices, it is also something that, through the convergence of myth and history, becomes a lived, bodily experience. Yes, it is all those things--abstract construct, juncture of social practices, and object of the mind--but its affective state does little to render it less powerful as a cultural or regional marker of identity. Scott Romine describes this contradiction as one of affect, noting that “the Souths so produced are often contested . . . affect works, I argue, to produce ‘the South’ as a

singular, totalizing, and authoritative--an object of belief that, to contemporary eyes, tends to appear as an object of skepticism: a fantasy believed by our credulous forebears" (*The Real South* 163). Romine's point, that the South as an "object of belief," a *thing* made real through affective sense, is also a "contested" space, full of contradictions, complicates Kreyling's point above. The "myth and history" aren't simply operating in combination--they are often combative *within* that coupling, and the sense of what it means to be Southern, or to experience, affectively or otherwise, Southernness, is a historical process of "body and mind."

Romine goes on, noting how his discussion of the South as both affective reality and fantasy aligns with Jennifer Rae Greeson's: "Grounded in a skepticism I fully share, Greeson's wedge between construction and 'real place' depends, I argue, on a deterioration of affect that has tended to dis-integrate the South, severing locution from location, and binding it to construction--that is, to representations experienced as transparently imaginative or fantastic" (163). It is this "deterioration" that interests me most, an effect central to the relationship between the novels I examine and their constructions of a Southern masculine identity. If much of what is grotesque about these novels is revealed to be the (generally speaking) normative, dominant constructions of masculinity, it is also the way in which these dominant constructions are tied--via affect, history, and a sense of regional discontinuity, the "dis-integrate" mentioned above--to the South. More than masculine gender constructions are contested in these novels; so, too, is the very idea of the South, even as it is re-integrated in new configurations.

Nonetheless, there is significant value in embracing the reality (affective or otherwise) of the South as a meaningful marker of identity and culture. In his discussion

of Walter Hines Page, Romine considers the worth of those who embrace, even while simultaneously contending, such an identity, and notes their ability to contribute to, and explain to others, contemporary discourses of region, race, and capital, and their influence on the generation of identity ("Southern Affect" 176). And it's important to note, particularly for the fictions covered in this study, that this contested handling of Southern identity does not prevent it from meaningful signification for many people. Romine addresses this in *The Real South*: "That the South is increasingly sustained as a virtual, commodified, built, themed, invented, or otherwise artificial territoriality--that is, as it becomes less imaginable as a 'natural' or 'organic' culture, if that antinomic construction ever existed--has hardly removed it from the domain of everyday use" (9). The "everyday use" might as well be "everyday embodiment"; part of Romine's argument about the South is an argument about culture, about the ways it is used to disembed or distinguish oneself as something when the geographical (or geopolitical) boundaries no longer apply. In joking about which "South" he subscribes to, Romine reminds us that there isn't *one South*, but a plurality of Souths, the sum total of which are in constant discourse, leading him--as, I argue, it leads my authors--to question "the problem of the real" (25), to question what authenticity means in that swirling morass of Southern plurality. The South is, I argue, *out there*, beyond us, lodged firmly in what Robert Jackson describes as "endlessly performative self-conceptions" (222). It is also deeply *within*, a concept that, having embedded itself in flesh via affect and social practices, manifests in lived bodily experience, and understanding that process, and the process by which bodies (via body reflexive theory) in turn influence social practices, is crucial

to, as Tara McPherson puts it, “understanding race and gender and of feeling southern” (5).

That lived bodily experience is of the utmost importance, and literature is one of the most important places in which to study it. Literature--and the characters who occupy the space between the pages--allow us to explore the relationships between bodies and social practices, between performative self-conceptions and region, race, class, capital, and, most importantly for this study, gender. The characters of Crews's, Hannah's, and Powell's novels allow us to explore the contested terrain of dominant Southern masculinities, to probe the limits of hegemonic constructions of gender and regional identity and find dissonance, seepage, and alterity, and to potentially re-align, imaginatively, what we might then bring into the real world to influence social practices. Blakey Vermeule sums it up when she tells us that one of the prime powers of literary characters is their ability to “help us reason about the social contract under conditions of imperfect access to relevant information” (55). That “social contract” applies also to the terms set by hegemonic constructions of gender makes this endeavor especially worthwhile. Sally Robinson puts it best when she writes that what is at stake in studying masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinity, is “the power to define the terms of the normative” (4). The power to define the normative is, at its core, the power to define normality, to define deviance, difference, and the aberrant. To control that discourse is to control the discourse of gender, and to do that, Judith Butler reminds us, is to wield the power to “undo” someone's life and identity (1).

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I examine the roles of violence, trauma, and regional exceptionalism in Harry Crews's *The Knockout Artist* (1988) and argue the novel presents bodily and subjective trauma as a kind of social scar tissue through which alterity becomes possible. I focus on the male body and trauma to illustrate how, with the help of the grotesque, they act as "speaking wounds," bodies that narrate the trauma of hegemonic gender orders.

Next, I turn to Barry Hannah's *Ray* (1981) to explore the novel's emphasis on grotesque feasting, contradiction, and Confederate symbolism as they work to construct a twisted, hopelessly knotted iteration of masculinity best defined as a state of historical crisis. I argue that Hannah's novel pinpoints the subjective discontinuity that afflicts—and is afflicted by—men (and more specifically, white Southern men) as they attempt to navigate contemporary configurations of masculinity through sexual and psychological consumption. I also explore the novel's use of fantasy, Confederate symbolism, and Lost Cause mythology to emphasize the historical and cultural impact of nineteenth century models of manhood on contemporary masculinities.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Padgett Powell's *A Woman Named Drown* (1987), a work never before critically discussed at length. In this chapter, I argue that the novel's emphasis on the social contract between identity, capitalism, and alienation helps to pinpoint contemporary obstructions to radical alterity in white Southern masculine identities. As a novel that explores the concept of masculine purposelessness, Powell's *A Woman Named Drown* provides a counterpoint to works covered earlier in the study. The novel follows narrator and protagonist Al as he attempts to define, and then

rigorously test, his “energy of activation,” a uniquely laissez faire approach to masculine subjectivity that may provide an exit strategy from dominant social practices that assist in the construction of masculinities.

Chapter 1. Violence, Trauma, and Grotesque Masculinity in Harry Crews's *The Knockout Artist*

In 1981 Harry Crews gave an interview to Tom Graves to discuss his books and his personal life. He likely didn't anticipate the crisis that lay before him. Despite the then-recent success of *A Childhood* (1978) and *Blood and Grits* (1979), Crews was about to plunge into a nine-year "personal abyss" (130) during which the normally prolific writer failed to produce a single novel. But while his fiction output tapered off in the early 80s, he continued to write and publish essays and give interviews. Very often, the topic was blood sports, violence, and the American fascination with the grim and gritty. He tells Graves,

I've always loved blood sports. Cockfighting, bullfighting, dogfighting, and the rest of it. In fact, I have a piece coming out in *Esquire* about dogfighting. But this article is no defense of it. Rather it is an effort to see whether or not we tell the truth rather than being hypocritical, hippy-dippy bullshitting jack-offs about it. Whether or not we tell the truth, so that we might be able to say something about the culture we live in, the society and country we come from, which God knows has gotta be among the more bloody countries that we know in history. (131)

For Crews, violence creates opportunities to critically examine the combatants and their cultures alike, and his emphasis on communication ("tell") clarifies the relationship between history, violence, and society. Violence reveals something deeply honest about individuals, about their place in the larger world. It provides, in its moments of pain and trauma, an opportunity for the kind of honest self-reflection that, according to Richard Russell, "gets to the impulse behind all his work, to lay bare the truth, to pick open the wound inside all of us" (276). For Crews, Russell tells us, as for his fictional and dramatic characters, there is a tendency to "wallow in their misery, hugging it to them as Philoctetes does" (278). The misery that results from, and just as often encourages violence in Crews's works is trauma, simultaneously a mood, a tone, and a state of

being that permeates his writing. In dismissing “hippy-dippy jack-offs,” Crews refuses easy, palatable explanations for who are and what we are. He instead demands we confront our bloodiest, cruelest, most inhumane proclivities in the hopes of getting to some vital truth, and that is found in trauma. After all, if the goal is to “tell the truth,” trauma is the answer to the question: What gets told?

What Crews creates, then, is a grotesque scenario, an uncomfortable confrontation between the world as we want to see it and the world as it *actually* exists and his work maintains these contrary understandings of reality in relative tension. This confrontation is fraught with physical and subjective dangers, precisely because, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, bodies that confront the grotesque, bodies that embody the contradictory poles that the grotesque represents, are themselves grotesque bodies, connected to the shifting, changing world around them, bodies ever changing and never finished or complete (26). Much as Mary Russo sees the grotesque situated within and around the body, so too does Bakhtin, and the “limits” he mentions extend beyond the body and into the social, public domain. The grotesque is a mode of flesh *within* larger contexts, a mode of relativity between the body and the world around it, between the subject and the social practices that shape it. The grotesque is a mode of flesh, literally in that its purpose is to generate (among other things) discomfort in bodies, but also symbolically in that it offers audiences the opportunity, welcome or not, to experience the familiar world on disturbingly unfamiliar terms. Works of grotesque realism, like the grotesque bodies that inhabit its media, are loci of deviancy through which discomfort becomes a tool of analysis and criticism that may, as Geoffrey Harpham puts it, disrupt the mind’s systems of classification (4).

These systems of classifications aren't the mind's alone. Grotesque bodies inhabit private as well as public spaces, and where they contact the fabric of larger social orders and practices, they produce the potential for change. Viewed at a distance from the moment to moment minutiae of life, the potential for grotesque bodies to impact and change social constructs represents their ability to influence history. Crews notes that our country is "among the more bloody countries that we know in history," and I want to emphasize "history" as the connective tissue between violence, trauma, masculinity, and their relationships to notions of region and nation in his novel, *The Knockout Artist*. Published in 1988, the book is a direct response to the themes Crews ponders in his interview with Graves, a meditation on blood sports and truth, and, more than anything, trauma and its impact on bodies through time. Of all his novels, *The Knockout Artist* is remarkable in its restraint, a book willing to indulge in scenes of grotesque excess, but rarely to the extent of the novels that bookend it in Crews's corpus. 1972's *Car*, for example, is the story of Herman, a man who, in ultimate adoration of the American automobile, decides to eat a Ford Maverick. The waste he produces--while on full public display, I would add--is melted down and sold as merchandise to commemorate his ingesting a symbol of American manufacturing. As a story that explores the strangest limits of grotesque feasts, *Car* reveals the insatiable national appetite for symbols of itself, the American hunger for America itself.

This same ruthless appetite serves as the central theme of *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), a novel in which the protagonist, former high school football star, Joe Lon Mackey, finds himself trapped in his hometown of Mystic, Georgia, obsessed with a and unable to engage with a rapidly changing world. Compared to *Car*'s surreal premise, A

Feast of Snakes explores Southern poverty and depravity in a tone rich with what David Buehrer calls black humor, a comic view of the world that “mixes his disgust at the social conditions that make Joe Lon Mackey’s plight possible with an underlying ‘identification,’ if not outright sympathy, for the poor white protagonist himself” (50). Buehrer identifies the novel as a grotesque, though he argues, as do I, that it veers from the stereotypical Southern model in which the poor, the gullible, and the uneducated are mocked from a distance (43). Instead, *Feast* treats its illiterate rural characters as worthwhile subjects, individuals whose struggles amid deplorable social and economic conditions lead them to grim and disturbing truths about themselves.

All We Need of Hell (1987) acts as spiritual successor to *Feast* and focuses on the rage-fueled exploits of Duffy Deeter, a man whose obsession with lifting weights and compulsive sexual intercourse allows the novel to explore, question, and ultimately criticize men’s bodies and desires. Men in *All We Need of Hell* use violence and aggression to shape the world around them, but the end result only reflects their grotesqueness and failures back at them. Crews would return to this theme of the worlds that reflect bodies in the aptly titled *Body*. Published in 1990, just two years after *The Knockout Artist*, *Body* complicates Crews’s exploration of masculinity and male bodies in the character of Shereel Dupont, a female bodybuilder struggling to constitute a feminine identity in a male-dominated sport. *Body* questions what it means to be masculine and feminine, and explores the intersections of gender, identity, and sport to determine where these ideas overlap and, perhaps, merge to become something else entirely.

An exhaustive review of Crews's substantial corpus is beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice to say that *The Knockout Artist* graphs into the themes and ideas Crews explored in his late 70s to early 90s work. Though by no means exclusive, I suggest a trajectory to Crews's novels that begins with an exploration of the male body, its limits, and its potential for grotesque signification in *Car* and reaches a subjective climax of crisis in *The Knockout Artist* and its prolonged meditation on trauma, masculinity, and the male body before Crews pivots to pay more attention to women in *Body*. This rough arc, sketched here to contextualize the placement of *The Knockout Artist* into a sustained interest on the part of Crews in men's bodies, masculinity, and the grotesque, places the novel in question as a critical work in the exploration of such themes and ideas. Where earlier novels see explosive, horrific violence as the response to trauma, *The Knockout Artist* ponders that trauma after the fact, explores how men embody it, and follows their (often doomed) attempts at redirecting their violent, masculine identities into less destructive configurations. Unlike, say, *Feast of Snakes*, a novel saturated with unrelenting pessimism that concludes with brutal slaughter, *The Knockout Artist* is a story about men attempting to control and escape the violence and carnality that surrounds them, and the novel ends on an ambiguous, if hopeful, tone. It's also one of the more harrowing and scathing examinations of masculinity Crews ever wrote, a deep-dive into contemporary white Southern manhood, its limits, and, ultimately, its instability.

The Knockout Artist is the story of Eugene "Knockout" Biggs, a former professional boxer whose career tanks when he discovers that he has a glass jaw. A single blow to the chin, even self-administered, is enough to instantly render him

unconscious. Unable to box, Eugene turns this unfortunate anatomical quirk into a means of employment, knocking himself out for the sadistic pleasure of rich audiences and kink fetishists. The novel inverts boxing's normal paradigm: one boxer fights another, and triumphs by either out-boxing his opponent or scoring one of several types of knockouts. Eugene does, of course, score a knockout of sorts, but his performance is at odds with the traditional affective and symbolic associations bound up with the athlete. Boxing scholar Kath Woodward argues that boxing offers to audiences a focal point for varied identifications, a means of projecting one's desires, dreams, and social and cultural meanings onto an athlete (1). In boxing, Woodward concludes, "fantasy and reality are inextricably combined" (1-2). In *The Knockout Artist's* unusual configuration, all the "boxer" can do is wound himself.

Wounds matter in *The Knockout Artist*, even when they're not visibly apparent. Wounds are, Dennis Patrick Slattery claims, integral to understanding the body's relationship to trauma. In his book, *The Wounded Body*, Slattery recalls the psychological and affective significance of his own wounds: "The wound is the trace of memory, what I have left of the experience; it also marks the place of what I would call deep memory, an indelible recollection that one feels always at the edge of the field of consciousness" (6). Slattery argues that wounds are neither solely physical in nature nor restricted to purely material significance as emblems of the body's trauma. He describes scars and wounds, whether physical, emotional, or cognitive as immensely meaningful to understanding the "imaginal body," a theoretical construction that "allows the body to speak its language" (7). An "imaginal body" is, in fact, the physical body, and is *also* the body as a phenomenological concept. Imaginal bodies reflect in their

wounds the social conditions that make such injuries possible, and allow us to critically examine the material and symbolic significance of wounds. Violence done to imaginal bodies is also violence done to physical bodies, but if the latter speaks in blood and pain, the former articulates “its language” of suffering throughout time, of trauma. Eugene’s grotesque inversion of the boxing paradigm positions him as an imaginal body, one that reflects the darkest desires of his audiences.

As the novel opens, Eugene ponders this, feeling that “he had long since passed the point beyond which he should not have gone and that his life would never be his own again” (2). The “point” indicates more than a threshold beyond which Eugene’s life was no longer under his own control, but also the source of his despair, the originating traumatic incident. His fixation on the past and its impact on the present underpins the novel’s treatment of trauma as less an isolated incident and more as an interconnected and perpetual fixation to someone’s life. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth reminds us that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature--the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance--returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Trauma’s true impact isn’t found in the original *thing*, the “simple violent or original event” of Eugene’s definitive “point,” but in the way it is carried through history as an “unassimilated” or fragmentary contextualization of the event. Trauma extends beyond the body, argues Nancie Hudson, and “shatters an individual’s sense of well-being and causes haunting memories, and socially constructed events are cultural trauma, for they are caused by society” (112). This shattered “sense of well-being” points to the depth at which trauma may impact an individual’s life, not to mention the lives of those who

witness trauma occur to others. Melissa Day, Katherine Bond, and Brett Smith conclude that “vicarious trauma,” a term they use to describe the negative effects of witnessing traumatic injuries occur to others, often causes anxiety, depression, and contemplation of suicide, particularly in athletes (2). More pertinent to the topic at hand, their research indicates that vicarious trauma disrupts an individual’s sense of personal and cultural safety and leads to “confusion and fear” (Day et al 2). Individuals who formerly felt invulnerable, or felt that misfortunes only really happen to others, are jolted with the knowledge that they, too, are vulnerable (2). In other words, subjects become aware of themselves as something other than the being they believed themselves to be, and they begin to see themselves as if from a distance, the others who were always liable to be injured and traumatized. Eugene’s “point” is an acknowledgement of this, a sober realization that he was *always* a vulnerable other.

In essence, trauma fractures an individual’s sense of selfhood, and requires a subjective reconfiguration to once again make sense of the world (if there’s sense to be made). Trauma sustained at the personal *and* cultural levels forces individuals to reconfigure themselves as subjects at both levels, as beings with agency over themselves and within the social structures of their culture and society. For Eugene, the discovery of his glass jaw is the beginning of his of subjective discontinuity, a moment in which trauma shattered his understanding of himself. That this occurs as a result of boxing is telling. In his historical and kinesthetic analysis of boxing, Gerald Gems details the relationship between the sport and masculine gender identity as follows:

Boxing has historically served as a ritual of masculinity. The practice of the sport, no matter how inept, served as proof of one’s courage and virility. Aggression and violence, pain and injury, even the possibility of death were accepted risks. Boxing was and is war, an individual combat in which competitors try to impose

their domination on another. Such intentions hold true whether they take place in street fights or within the confines of the ring. (212)

Boxing codes and reinforces masculinity through violence and domination. It's a "war" in the sense that one boxer attempts to physically dominate another, yes, but also in the sense that each boxer must prove to himself and to others, to the social orders that profit from and take pleasure from the sport. And as Gems notes, this proof of masculinity isn't limited to the boxing ring. Violence is the primary method through which masculinity is embodied, through which domination is accomplished, and it matters little whether it happens in the sanctioned world of pugilism or a bare-knuckle street brawl. Gems points out that boxers in and out of the ring assume monikers that further code them as masculine--Hector "Macho" Comacho, for example--but Eugene's moniker, "Knockout," applies to no one but himself (212). Incapable of domination except to perform its facsimile on his own body, Eugene cannot embody the masculine ideal of the boxer. He cannot even embody a serious contestant; the only war he wages is with himself.

Aside from serving as a ritual to code and embody masculinity, boxing also serves as a way to connect with a larger community. Gems argues that boxers often assume traditional (hegemonic) roles of masculine providers and guardians, gatekeepers for a community to distinguish itself through vicarious participation in the boxer's accomplishments (212). Thus at the level of the personal (one-on-one) and the social orders and social practices that shape the sport, men's boxing remains a complicated negotiation of what masculinity means as an embodied gender identity, one fraught with risks. Woodward argues that masculinities are constituted through a diverse array of mechanisms, but is quick to point out that the gender identities at play in boxing

are innately bound up in ideas of belonging and identification, the need to belong to a larger public order of bodies, and the desire for recognition (38). All of this is achieved through the violence, the violence done to oneself that carries the risks Gems discusses, and the violence done to others that connotes, in the most achingly literal sense, dominance. But unable to deploy this violence against others or withstand more than a glancing blow to the chin, Eugene is left with nothing to embody save trauma.

The above discussion of boxing, masculinity, and violence, seeks to accomplish two things. First, I argue that violence is a prime, but by no means exclusive, conduit through which men embody hegemonic masculinity. In or out of the ring, violence is key to men using their socially coded masculinity to personally dominate another man. I also argue that this embodiment of masculinity is dependent on personal and social pressures acting in tandem, often directed by dominant social and political power structures via social practices. In other words, society shapes the body, and the body in turn then shapes the society; the conceptualization, construction, and reification of masculinity is a two-way street, though the flow of traffic is bound to vary. Finally, I argue that *The Knockout Artist* explores this reflexive relationship between the body and society through its male characters (though not exclusively through them) in a manner that posits white Southern masculinity is itself a kind of, or inseparable from, trauma. To be clear, I define trauma as a disruption of bodily and subjective identity that results in estrangement, alienation, and a need to re-constitute a subjective identity.

For many men, particularly white Southern men like Eugene Biggs, the junction point of masculinity and social dominance is violence, and violence is the tool by which masculine bodies inflict trauma on themselves and others. Violence, Colm Walsh

argues, statistically leads to heightened aggression in social and personal interactions, and perpetuates cycles wherein the trauma resulting from violence leads to further violence (198). But contextualized by the grotesque, violent trauma may be repurposed. R. B. Crosby pinpoint's three rhetorical features of the grotesque that promote such change: "Incongruous combination, ridiculous mockery, and corporeal excess" (110). Through these features, the grotesque works to subvert what a given community defines as "normal" or "natural," and "bends or breaks the boundaries of the world, such that what seems natural takes on unsettling new possibilities" (Crosby 110). Warped by the grotesque, the violent trauma at the heart of men's embodiment in *The Knockout Artist* is capable of shocking men into critical self-inquiry. We see this early in the novel as Eugene prepares for an upcoming performance:

He looked down at the new pair of boxing shoes he was wearing. It was the first time he had ever had them on because they were not his. They had been furnished to him, along with the pair of Everlast boxing trunks he was wearing. They did not fit him very well because he was not wearing a cup, a jockstrap but not a cup, and neither was he wearing the heavy leather belt that would have held the cup. He had no need of a cup in the bouts he fought now. His hands resting on his knees were already taped. He had taped them himself. (2)

What Eugene wears neither belongs to him nor accurately reflects what he embodies. They are the trappings of a boxer, material objects meant to lend him the symbolic and practical significance that he can no longer intrinsically possess. This lack extends to the "cup" and "heavy leather belt" that, at least on the surface, mark him as both a boxer *and* a man; that which protects the anatomical marker of his sex is of "no need" because Eugene's inability to participate in genuine athletic competition emasculates him. Even his hands, the primary tools of a boxer, are "resting on his knees," a posture that implies exhaustion or capitulation, something of which, as indicated by the

admission that he “taped them himself,” Eugene is aware. Eugene is painfully, sharply aware of the discontinuity between his own notions of masculine self-identity and that dictated by hegemonic masculinity. His performance as a man is simply that--a violent pornographic reenactment of personal trauma and masculinity meant to stimulate pleasure in others.

On the flip side, Jake, his “manager,” is a woman who dresses as a man, speaks like a man, but is described by Eugene as an “absolute breastless and hipless wonder” (4). In this sarcastic retort, the grotesque is deployed: Jake is a “wonder” *despite* being “breastless and hipless,” the most obvious bodily markers of her biological sex. In the purview of hegemonic gender orders, Jake is grotesque precisely because she lacks the outwardly visible indicators of gender that “beautiful” Eugene, emasculated by his inability to engage in meaningful violence with others, cannot help but possess, and certainly cannot escape. Jake’s ability to embody a (feminized) masculinity operates as a grotesque mockery of traditional hegemonic masculinity and serves as a means of “undisciplining the existing order of things” (Crosby 110). Crosby points out that grotesque mockery may destabilize “power differentials” in a given social order, able to rob an object, idea, or body of its “specialness” (110-111). Embodied in Jake, traditional dominant (hegemonic) masculinity is uncoupled from the male body, and the existing social and political power structures that regulate its embodiment are exposed to mockery. In the grotesque tradition, Crosby argues, the female body often serves as a coordinate of bodily excess (111); Russo agrees, citing that in male-dominated social and political power structures, the female body is *the* deviant body, purposely coded as such so that men may be the embodiments of power and belonging (11-12). Jake’s

excess comes in the form of her ability to embody either gender identity, and to move between them in liminal, authoritative ease. In her role as “manager,” Jake controls her boxer, a type of athlete whose violent handiwork is considered by David Scott to embody (literally) the “masculinity problematic,” the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity as it operates through mass media and athletic competition (474). Her presence also helps to establish the novel’s view of masculinity, one that Daniel Nathan describes as “a cult of masculinity that articulates a deeply ambivalent ethos, one where beauty and unrestrained violence go hand in hand” (31).

In its depictions of violence and trauma, *The Knockout Artist* is ambivalent as to whether drag performances of masculinity (Jake, for example) or female masculinity (Charity, Eugene’s lover) are somehow more substantive embodiments of masculine identity compared to what Eugene and other men in the book are able to muster. Furthermore, the novel mostly sidesteps the queerness of boxing as a sport that both affirms heteronormative masculine ideals and in which half-naked men pound each other’s brains out and train in highly homosocial gym environments. Crews’s novel instead focuses on *how* masculinity is consolidated in a body, *how* it operates as an identity for men, and what happens when that entire process is violently disrupted. The intersection of violence and athletic prowess are central to Eugene’s notion of what constitutes authentic (as opposed to performative) masculine identity. Victoria Robinson argues that “sport is crucial in the maintenance and reproduction of a specifically masculine identity . . . sport is not merely a reflection on some postulated essence of society but an integral *part* of society” (62). The “part” of society I’m focusing on here is, of course, the South, and more specifically white Southern men and their deployment of

violence in the construction and reification of masculinity. Michael Messner and David Sabo claim that violence and athletic aptitude are cultural requirements for white Southern men to consolidate dominant constructions of Southern masculinity (3-4). For white Southern men like Eugene, blood sport confirms the embodiment of authentic masculinity, but Jake's presence acts as a grotesque reminder of the constructed, often performative nature of gender identity in the first place, and opens masculinity to questions about how joint personal and social recognition of manhood impacts masculine identity².

Henry Carrigan Jr. identifies this as a recurring theme in Crews's works, one in which athleticism, particularly in violent sports, provides the "ultimate chance to get naked and to get close to the truth about self identity" (44). In this schema, the body acts as what Carrigan Jr. calls a "site of revelation" (43), the material site of negotiation between identity and one's place in society. For men like Eugene, and for many real-life Southern men, the commingling of violence and respect is tantamount to authentic embodiments (and public displays) of masculine and Southern identity. In *Angry White Men*, Michael Kimmell charts white Southern masculinity as a progression of moral ideas that eventually--though not without deviation--cohered into an identity founded on applications of violence. He writes:

Southern whites called it 'honor'; by the turn of the century, it was called 'reputation' . . . The nexus among honor, masculinity, and violence is deep and profound in many cultures. The American version just so happens to be so intimate as to feel primal, even natural. Violence has long been

² Lynda Nead posits that open wounds on a boxer's face--those treated by a cutman--are also key visual identifiers of the performative role played by the male body in boxing--that of overt, violence, masculinity (370-371). Eugene's wounds are not visible; his glass jaw cannot be understood as such simply by looking at him, and thus even in the midst of violent blood sport he cannot optically register as performing the masculinity prescribed by his sport.

understood in America as the best way to ensure that others publicly recognize one's manhood. (178)

Similarly, Craig Thompson Friend summarizes white Southern manhood of 1990, two years after the publication of *The Knockout Artist*, as a sharp and continuous “contradiction between traditional southern martial violence and less well-understood southern wariness about war” (vii). The masculine martial ideal, Friend notes, originates in Reconstruction-era shifts in Southern social and political dynamics. Violence for white Southern men of that time required “broader and more ideological purpose, specifically to demonstrate honor in and protection of one's self, family, and region” (Friend xii). Violence spans this historical distance, connecting the ideological requirements of Reconstruction-era martial manhood to contemporary white Southern masculinity; over time, the need to demonstrate honor and protect one's family and region shifted inward. In the era of *The Knockout Artist*, what needs defending is a white Southern masculinity reliant on violence that is, as Jake's performance hints, mere performance, and the contradiction between deploying violence in defense of one's identity and a simultaneous wariness about its efficacy generates grotesque tension. White Southern men are expected to be ready, willing, and able to use the violence they are, historically, also taught to dread, and they are expected to do this privately and publicly.

This public, social aspect to masculine navigation of identity is a key theme in *The Knockout Artist* and to the grotesque as a narrative mode. In the opening staged fight scene, as in most scenes in which Eugene performs his singular trick, there is little distinction between those who participate in the violence and those who take pleasure from the spectacle. According to Bakhtin, this aspect of the grotesque, the

carnavalesque, “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators”

(7). He continues:

Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (7)

Though Bakhtin writes about carnival as it transpired in the late medieval and early modern periods, his claim that it refuses to distinguish between spectator and performer is especially relevant to the city in which *The Knockout Artist* is set, New Orleans, a city Eugene views as “a city of conventions” (39) as much as “a circus, a circus that didn’t travel, but a circus nonetheless” (41). A circus that doesn’t travel becomes, in time, a kind of static convention, always bringing new faces to a spectacle that depends on its ability to stand out from everything else around it. But the contradiction between “circus” and “convention” indicates how Eugene truly sees New Orleans: a zone of negation, a place where extremes meet and cancel each other out, a place *within* the South that also stands apart from the South (of Eugene’s childhood), a place where carnival never ends and thus transforms into rote vulgarity.

In essence, Eugene ascribes a sense of regional exceptionalism to New Orleans, and considers it as a place distinct from, yet situated within, the rest of the South. This view of the city is far from unique. Thomas Adams, Sue Mobley, and Matt Sakakeeny argue that in discourses about national and regional identities New Orleans often “resides as a thing apart, the exception to the exception. From the beginning of its existence as a juridically American locale, those both inside and outside the city have marked it off as anathema to broader patterns of urbanity, culture, politics, economics,

and, indeed, Americanness” (1). Like the snuff film and pornographic spectacles that regularly appear in the novel, the city’s inhabitants, and the very city itself, the uncomfortable “exception to the exception,” the “anathema” to all that is familiar, constantly remind Eugene of his own otherness. Aaron Nyerger frames this as an ecocritical problem, arguing that New Orleans is a city of phony politics, a phrase he uses to describe how “key bearers of the city’s mythology have positioned their own exceptionalist claims as foreign and fraudulent” (73). Nyerger sees the various ecological and environmental disasters that befallen the city, specifically Hurricane Katrina, as moments that expose the underlying economic, racial, and cultural inequity that commodified and marketed to tourists as “authentic” (87). The footlights Bakhtin warns about are in Nyerger’s view already installed and turned on full blast, but the illusion, carefully packaged and sold to tourists, survives.

Earlier scholars locate the city’s willingness to violate boundaries as the core of its exceptionalism. In *Sustaining New Orleans*, Barbara Eckstein argues that the city’s “interracialism and other boundary violations that emerge in the mongrel tales and informal histories that claim exceptional status for New Orleans are arguably *the* defining characteristic of the city’s folkways” (3). Eckstein’s emphasis on folkways centers an understanding of the city’s carnival atmosphere as one of deviation from a national and regional norm, and it reminds me very much of Bakhtin’s emphasis on folk culture in the grotesque. While Bakhtin maps carnival as an expression of suppressed carnality in folk culture, Eckstein graphs this into New Orleans through a willingness to disregard (to a greater or lesser extent) dominant taboos regarding interracial relations. She reads this as a response to shifting historical dynamics of different economic and

imperial demands placed on the city by its various owners and rulers, and she locates in this dynamic a kind of “pulse,” a tone that dominates the discourse surrounding the city’s character and affect (3-4). In positing that the city’s unique populations and cultures lend New Orleans an exceptional and specific affect, Eckstein is not alone. Pierce F. Lewis argues that the city’s romantic qualities rely on its unique architecture, its mixed European heritage, and its function as a sea port (5-8). This is not to say that Eckstein and Lewis disregard the importance of historical context, or that they fail to graph New Orleans into larger regional and national historical discourse. On the contrary, Eckstein warns that romanticizing the city without more fully understanding its interconnected folkways and transnational roots does a great disservice to what makes the city remarkable (218). Neither Eckstein nor Lewis may be quite as adamant as Nyerges about disputing any and *all* ideas of exceptionalism with regards to New Orleans, but they’re just as willing to critically examine the problems often hidden by narratives of exceptionalism. So, too, is Violet Harrington Bryan, whose book *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature* (1993) ends by examining the mythic connection of the city to courtesans. Rather than dismiss the exceptionalism couched in this mythic association, she argues it “emphasizes the richness of community and the possibility of healing” and generates critical inquiry into “the dialogue between writers across boundaries of race and gender” (164). By using myth criticism with an eye toward its impact on the city’s representation in literature, Bryan recuperates Eckstein’s and Lewis’s embrace of an exceptional New Orleans with Nyerge’s argument that exceptionalism has long concealed the city’s worst problems.

Later, I'll return to the idea of exceptionalism in regions and explore its connection to the social construction of men's bodies and masculine identity, but for now it suffices to say that New Orleans in *The Knockout Artist* is not a place of healing--not for most of the novel, at any rate--and the community around Eugene is often deeply antagonistic to any notion of healing. Gary L. Long describes Eugene's place in the city as "just another pornographic exhibit in a city of perverted displays," and I argue this applies as much to the community around Eugene (with a specific exception to be discussed later) as it does city itself (51). Indeed, the above discussion about the city and its affiliated narratives of exceptionalism serves to highlight the novel's emphasis on carnival. *The Knockout Artist* treats the city as a Bakhtinian atmosphere that "embraces all the people," and also all of the myths. It's a place simultaneously *of* Eugene, curated by his point of view and life experiences, and also *beyond* him, an overwhelming spectacle in which he is situated as both performer and spectator of his own recurring trauma. Suspended in grotesque tension between *all* such categories, and unable to constitute a hegemonic masculinity through violence and authenticity, Eugene's struggle to constitute *any* kind of masculinity is constantly frustrated.

Much of this frustration stems from trauma and its ability in this novel to continually re-contextualize Eugene's experiences. As mentioned earlier, the root of this seems, at first, to be the blow that ended his promising career as a boxer, the one that he never even felt (32). Very often, boxing in the United States has been a conduit for white men to vent racial tensions or slug away at stand-ins for economic hardship even as it reinforces those same social conditions (Cooley 420-421). Often, Constancio Arnaldo Jr. points out, boxing allows men to negotiate to "normative" or "hegemonic"

masculinity, and to locate in the sport's champions masculine ciphers for gender identity (656). But here, Eugene's ability to box has been turned in upon itself, a grotesque imitation of sport. Rather than right any wrongs or strike back at the societal forces that frustrate him, Eugene's performances only compound his public humiliation, and every blow he delivers to himself underlines a deeper sense of emasculation and abandonment. After discovering his glass jaw, his coach and surrogate father, Budd, tells Eugene, "I can't fucking believe it. The first time you're tagged and you're down like a shot bird" (32). Comparing Eugene to a "bird" is a thinly veiled crack at his masculinity--bird is, after all, common slang for "woman"--but the verb, "shot," has several meanings. To be "shot" is to be wounded, potentially killed, a meaning applicable to Eugene's career as a boxer. Coupled to "bird," it reminds Eugene that to be feminine is to be unable to withstand violence or dole it out; bad news indeed for a boxer. Unmanned by his surrogate father and the man whose job it is to direct Eugene's violence, Eugene gets KO'ed in every subsequent fight, something that, according to Linda Kalof, connotes feminization: "In the case of all male games and sports, when a man loses a fight, he loses his identification with masculinity and he assumes a weak feminine role" (439). Eugene's loss is indicative of what Budd sees as his true, feminine ("bird") self, and his emasculation is both personal and professional; the two are, in the realm of contact blood sports, one and the same.

Despite Budd's admonition that he's with Eugene all the way (34), the reality is that Eugene is already washed-up, both as a fighter *and* a man, and it is, finally, Budd who tells him as much: "You're the sorriest fighter to ever come down the pike! Unfucking-believable. It's through, finished. *My grandmother could knock you out.*'

Eugene sat numb on the table. His whole body was cold. Even his heart felt cold, frozen in his chest. There was nothing he could say or do. He felt utterly defenseless” (emphasis mine, 35). That Eugene’s total dismissal comes from Budd, a man Eugene regards “like a daddy” (67) frames the castigation as a deeply personal ejection from adult manhood. To Budd, Eugene is little more than a child, unworthy of calling himself a man. Even Charity, his lover, refers to Eugene as a “sweet man-child” (67), emphasizing that the only alternatives to legitimate manhood are infancy or feminization. Bud’s and Charity’s hyperbole makes clear the stark subjective trauma Eugene experiences, and shortly after Bud’s dismissal, Eugene himself ponders what this means: “He got off the table and walked to the mirror over the sink and stood watching himself. What in God’s name was he to do now? He couldn’t go back home, and it was not as though he were a carpenter or plumber. He had no skills at all. Nothing. He was nothing” (35).

Eugene is “nothing” because, in the context of the social practices that have defined his manhood, he is not a man, never really was, and, as implied by his lack of skills in male-dominated trade fields, he will never again be one. For a man who has been *unmanned*, there is no home, no father, and no *self* to which to return. In addition to being a physical site, “home” is also a coordinate for identity, a psychological and affective site where masculinity may be fully constituted into a sense of subjective selfhood. Throughout his work, Crews frequently returns to this idea that “home” is both critical for the formation and stabilization of identity and also a source of life-long trauma. The farm on which Crews grew up proved to be exactly that: at 5 years of age, Crews struggled with polio, and just a year later, he fell into a pot of boiling water.

Biographer Ted Geltner describes it as a grotesque shedding of flesh, Crews's skin sloughing from his body as his relatives raced to get him medical attention (21). Beltner tells us that Crews was "condemned to his bed for twenty-four hours a day, once again an invalid for the second time in a year. He was not yet six years old" (21). Small wonder, then, that the concept of home is fraught with danger in the man's fictions; for Shereel Dupont in *Body*, "home" with her Turnipseed kin is a stifling, oppressive retreat into rural ignorance and ignominy; for Joe Lon Mackey in *A Feast of Snakes*, home is defined by his sister's madness, his parent's failures, and his doomed marriage, and the town of Mystic promises nothing but continued misery and eventual bloodshed; and for Eugene Biggs, the dirt farm from which he hails is a distant memory, a counterpoint to the "nothing" he has become. In Crews's works, home is trauma, a distant memory that finds new and grotesque ways to twist the knife deeper.

Crews is by no means unique in treating home as a source of trauma, particularly among white Southern writers. In *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction*, John Duvall charts the conceptual development of home in authors such as Faulkner, O'Connor, Barth, and Percy, and observes that the "relationship to home for so many characters in white southern fiction of the twentieth century is deeply troubled" (1). Duvall locates racial inequality at the center of this problem of "home and homelessness," and borrows Toni Morrison's work on figurative blackness to argue that white Southern anxieties surrounding the concept of "home" stem from complicated cultural interactions between identity and otherness. *The Knockout Artist* opts to position class at the center of this dialog between white identity, home, and otherness, but as Jane Adams and D. Gorton point out, class conflict is often inseparable from

racial conflict, and focusing on one to the exclusion of the other frequently leads to poor analysis of social and cultural conditions (343). Eugene Biggs may not hail from the Mississippi Delta, but he's nonetheless critically aware that his lower-class upbringing presented few legitimate ways to earn a living and consolidate a familiar masculine identity as proscribed by dominant regional social practices. There is nowhere for him to go because the idea of "home" is, for Eugene, the origin point of an identity that no longer exists.

What Eugene correctly intuitis is the way in which hegemonic masculinities actively work to erase other forms of masculine embodiment--or to put it another way, he's starting to understand how dominant constructions of masculinity and regional identities work together to dictate the terms of white masculine subjectivity. Disgusted with himself, he berates his reflection, then delivers himself a knockout uppercut: "It was as if he were not involved, as if he were watching one stranger hit another. His face disappeared in the mirror, which had gone instantly black" (35). Here, the "stranger" is neither Eugene, nor is the "another" who occupies Eugene's body. There is only the "black" void of nothing--no face, no man, no human being. Trauma generates a sense of discontinuity, an eerie and grotesque abjection: One's own body and consciousness are alien to oneself, one doesn't occupy the body reflected in the mirror, and what one witnesses can also defy the very act of witnessing. According to David Greven, an abject subject's suffering can elicit both sympathy and revulsion in others, and it can allow us to view the subject in question as a "victim-monster," a being that represents unresolved grotesque tension (198). Greven argues that abject masculine victim-monsters reveal a horror or hideousness about male physicality, and transform the

bodies of men, often defined as such for their power and dominance, into a “grotesque spectacle” (200). Greven’s idea of the victim-monster is attractive for several reasons. First, it invites us to view the abject as innately grotesque, a being that attracts and repels our attention and sympathy. It also grafts well onto Eugene Biggs, a being whose own reflection in the mirror is bifurcated into a “stranger” and an “another,” neither of whom seem to represent who and what Eugene has previously understood himself to be.

In Greven’s theory, the victim-monster isn’t quite the point; instead, the victim-monster’s suffering and trauma, and more specifically the reaction to its grotesque embodiment, presents the spectator with an opportunity to unpack, understand, and ultimately overcome such suffering. Similarly, Caruth tells us that to theorize on the relationship between trauma and suffering is to understand “what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness . . . in a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5). Deployed as a grotesque spectacle, Eugene’s suffering calls attention to both how masculinity inflicts suffering, and how masculine-identified individuals likewise suffer. Eugene (and white Southern men) can never experience what, for example, women experience *as a result* of white Southern men, but in a recognition of trauma there exists the potential for a recognition of suffering, an opportunity for Eugene (and men like him) to see how they fit into the larger system of violence and brutality as it is deployed against diverse groups of people, and perhaps find a way to cease participating in such systems. This affords a moment of what I call grotesque articulation wherein bodily and subjective reconfiguration occurs as a result

of engaging with the source of grotesque discomfort. In Eugene's case, his body and the masculine subjectivity constituted within are revealed to embody not the dominant constructions of masculinity, but a collection of *some things else*, an Other, a "stranger," and "another" he fails to recognize as himself. In this moment of grotesque articulation, Eugene exhibits a kind of double consciousness, something perhaps not often considered (and likely never required) of a white Southern man, and encounters what Wolfgang Kayser described as the "sinister background of a brighter and rationally organized world . . . something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one" (21). This "world totally different" amounts to Eugene recognizing the "nothing" he sees in himself as himself, not some new configuration of manhood, but rather what Eugene has *always* been, a personal embodiment of the "ominous and sinister" world that likewise *always* existed.

Kayser's understanding of the grotesque focuses heavily on this aspect of the hidden uncanny or sinister underbelly of reality, the notion that the world "we fear it might be" (McElroy 11) is, in fact, a world we do not want, a world to be feared, and, at best, *maintained* in tension with the better, rational world we inhabit. For Kayser, this encounter with the other reality, the one we fear lurks just under the surface of the world we *want*, produces more than simple discomfort. It threatens to overwhelm the individual, to destroy any semblance of subjective self-awareness, and it results in what Kayser describes as the third element of the grotesque, the "observation of a soul in the process of being estranged from itself and thus ineluctably bound for destruction" (143). But Bakhtin, one of Kayser's most astute critics, felt the latter's understanding of the grotesque was insufficient in considering how the mode operates in modern literature

(48). Bakhtin contends that while encountering the “world as we fear it to be” is a dangerous, potentially destructive moment, it’s also an opportunity for growth and change, a moment that encapsulates and celebrates the cycles of life and death that lie at the core of the grotesque. Eugene’s moment of grotesque articulation sets him on a course of self-inflicted violence and constant rage: His ability to constitute a dominant construction of masculinity is destroyed, and that part of him, the part that came from the dirt farm in Georgia, the part that put his whole life into boxing, is dead, but that also means the *potential* to constitute something else, to be reborn as *someone else* remains. In this way, moments of grotesque articulation--the realization of the self as both subject and object--become moments ripe with (if ambivalent to) the potential for alterity.

The grotesque unveils alterity through discomfort, and few scenes in the novel exhibit this as strongly as the one in which Eugene visits his lone friend, Pete, a film projector at a local pornographic theater that dabbles in snuff films. When Eugene arrives, one such film is playing, and both men are alternately repulsed, and drawn to the grotesque spectacle on the screen:

Two Mexican bandits, swarthy, with greasy black hair, knives sheathed on their belts, stood on either side of the naked young man tied to a chair. The young man had safety pins through his lower lip and the bandits were cutting his ears off. Slowly. The young man and the chair were covered in blood. There was not an actor in the world who was good enough to do what the young man in the chair was doing, to make the sounds he was making.

“Sweet fucking Baby Jesus,” said Eugene, “you got another one.”

“Yeah. It’s been packing’m in all day. Snuff films always a great draw. You wonder why I go through a fifth in less than four hours?”

“Not anymore I don’t.”

“I watched that poor fucker butchered alive six times today.”

“Then don’t watch.”

“It’s hard not to, man.”

“I know,” said Eugene, looking away as one of the Mexican bandits was going into the young man’s mouth with a pair of pliers. He went over to the far wall where he could not see the film even if he wanted to. Pete turned in his chair, back to the screen. The audience had stopped groaning and gasping and was now cheering as if for a racehorse or a football team. (42-43).

While the novel makes use of third-person point of view, it is closely aligned with Eugene’s perspective and experiences. As such, the gruesome details of the snuff film, related matter-of-factly, are broken by a single word, “Slowly,” and this interjection from Eugene, this direct intrusion into the narrative, emphasizes his disgusted response to the grisly mutilation on display. Such a sight would unnerve most people; it certainly unnerves both Pete and Eugene, driving the former to drink and the latter to move to “where he could not see the film even if he wanted to.” Much of their disgust and apprehension derives from the film’s content, but a significant portion of that stems from the racist caricatures, the “Mexican bandits” who commit the heinous acts upon the helpless “tied” prisoner. Here, men who represent racist Others carve up another man, and as masculine bodies use violence to dominate another masculine body, they also stimulate the audience into “cheering,” not unlike spectators at a boxing match, revved up by the sight of a particularly powerful, bloody blow. In this way, the snuff film and the violent acts within it act represent New Orleans and its inhabitants (Pete and Eugene included), a place and a people caught in cycles of carnivalesque build-up and release that temporarily and safely allow for the expression of deviant urges (violent, sexual, bodily) so that they don’t over-accumulate and threaten the status quo. The film, like the comically hyper-violent fights of Rabelais that Bakhtin examines, “presents no ordinary fight, no commonplace blows administered in everyday life. The blows here have a broadened, symbolic, ambivalent meaning; they at once kill and regenerate, put an end

to the old life and start the new. The entire episode is filled with a Bacchic atmosphere” (205). The Mexican bandits may represent racist caricatures, but the violence upon a helpless man (his race is never specified) takes on a symbolic ritualistic significance; he is killed so they, the audience, may “regenerate” in a Bacchic frenzy of violent rebirth. They are there on screen because the audience, Eugene, and Pete can’t bear to see themselves in their place.

Part of what Eugene urges Pete to not watch, then, is what is denied to both men: a rebirth into masculine subjectivity. What Eugene sees in the snuff film is a hyper-violent analog to his own boxing career, the blood sport in which men beat other men’s bodies and brains to pulp. Boxers achieve victory through either technical proficiency or by dominating their opponent into submission (whether it’s via knockout, technical knockout, or the judges’ decisions). That said, I don’t intend to characterize boxing as little more than brute violence; a boxing match may be a story without words, Joyce Carol Oates reminds us, but “this doesn’t mean that has no text or language, that is somehow ‘brute,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘inarticulate,’ only that the text is improvised in action” (258). The snuff film does away with the social trappings of boxing, its rules and regulations, its reputation as a *sport*, and strips the violence down to its ideological base: violence deployed, violence withstood, all for the pleasure of some bodies, and the brutal domination of other bodies. Masculinity is here condensed into a single violent impulse, an expression of hegemonic power, but Eugene recognizes it as something else, a repulsive performance of masculine brutality.

The allusion to sports in the audience’s reaction, particularly “football,” further emphasizes the ways in which violence and trauma are coded as spectacles of

masculine embodiment to be witnessed and enjoyed even as the damage piles up for those directly involved. As discussed above, *The Knockout Artist* has nothing to say about the composition of the audience, and likewise about the racial and national identities of the man being killed onscreen; rather than speculate about *who* they are, I prefer to point out that audience's "cheering" is provoked by an escalation of the torture, from the external ("cutting his ears off") to the internal (taking the pliers "into" the man's mouth). Symbolically, the victim is deafened, then muted, and thus becomes the masochistic double for the audience, he who suffers a pain by which the audience might thrill at imagining for themselves, a blank *internal* canvas that can't speak on his own behalf and couldn't hear his own cries of anguish if he was still capable of making them. At the same time, they cheer for the Mexican bandits, men who, precisely because they are racist caricatures, become disposable *external* conduits for the sadistic fantasies of the audience; in identifying with the victim and his powerless male body, the audience experiences the masochistic thrill of being worked upon *by themselves*, a killing that enacts the ritualistic death and rebirth of the self found in carnivalesque excess. In the dark confines of the theater, they can glut on sadistic voyeurism and find release from their own forbidden sexual urges before leaving their vented tensions behind.

Like Eugene, we readers are reminded that bearing witness to trauma does not necessarily mean sympathizing, and the fact that this sublimation doesn't work for either Pete or Eugene is telling. Repulsed by the grotesquerie arrayed before them, they fail to identify with either the victim *or* the perpetrators, bodies that do in fact reflect their pasts as boxers, and bodies that nominally represent their own. Pete comments on this: "You strange, Eugene. You don't . . . you don't signify, man" (47). Eugene's failure to "signify"

indicates his subjective discontinuity, and more specifically that he is undergoing grotesque articulation, seeing the scaffold of his masculine identity in gruesome, grotesque vividness on the theater screen. Perhaps what Pete sees in Eugene is what Eugene sees in himself--a being whose traumatic past has eradicated his potential for a future as a man entirely (or even mostly) aligned with hegemonic models, certainly, but also as an individual who feels there is a place for him in a larger society. When asked to confess his past to Charity, Eugene condenses it into three sentences: "I'm an ex-pug from a dirt farm in South Georgia. That's all. That's it" (74). The finality of the "it," the pronoun for the totality of Eugene's life, lands at the end of the third sentence, separated from the referent contraction of *I am* across a gulf of two periods and two clauses. Syntactically and grammatically, the disconnect between the Eugene of the past and present, and the impact of Eugene's trauma, could not be more clear.

But the "it" of Eugene's totality also encompasses regional ("South Georgia") and class ("dirt farm") identities that connect Eugene's private trauma to bigger, public traumas and classifications of identity. In discussing the power of trauma in American literature, Michelle Balaev notes its ability to connect the private to the public, a theme that highlights "the individual experience of trauma that necessarily oscillates between private and public meanings, between personal and social paradigms" (17). Viewed as a kind of connective scar tissue between "personal and social paradigms," trauma in American literature can help draw attention to the relationship between individual experiences of suffering and the origins of trauma in larger social orders, and between the individual and notions of class, race, gender, and region. And perhaps this is what truly disgusts Eugene about the snuff film, that visual recreation of a more extreme

version of the male on male violence he once perpetrated for the “cheering” of an audience, and for the fatherly approval of Budd, and for the continued consolidation of a white Southern masculinity that, in the end, could all be destroyed with a single blow to the chin. The true source of Eugene’s discomfort is the fragility of white Southern masculinity, its delicacy despite its coding as a mechanism for the deployment of violence.

The Mexican bandits are convenient stand-ins for people like Eugene and Pete, nameless, faceless Others onto whom the shame and guilt (and sadistic pleasure-taking) can be dumped in order to avoid the uncomfortable culpability that comes with admitting the grotesque truth that *they* are what Eugene and Pete were (and perhaps still are to some degree). The men on screen, torturers and tortured alike, encapsulate the fulcrum of white Southern masculinity in their ability to deploy and withstand violence; that such a depiction of masculinity requires the killers be played by foreign stand-ins only emphasizes the grotesque nature of the gender identity under discussion. It also emphasizes, as I will discuss in the next section, that much of what connects bodies to this gender identity has to do with viewing the trauma produced in this process as a regional rite of passage into manhood, a rite based on pummeling others while getting beaten to a pulp, and on wearing the resultant mental, physical, and emotional trauma as a badge of honor and legitimacy. But before that, I want to clarify a point about boxing, one that will (hopefully) complicate the prior discussion and what is to come. Though I position the sport as part of a problematic conflux of hegemonic masculinity and social practices, and while much of the above discussion risks totalizing boxing as nothing more than a tool to be used *exclusively* for the reification of

hegemonic masculinity, I argue that is not the case. Like most time-honored sports, boxing is complicated, and its participants often more so; Woodward recalls Joe Louis's matches against Max Schmeling as a bout that not only represented violent resistance to totalitarianism, and argues that for many minorities, boxing has often provided a route out of poverty and into political resistance (25). Boxers billed as a "Great White Hope" do carry racist social overtones, but black boxers (and Hispanic boxers, and boxers domestic and foreign who are not identified as white) often carry more than a chip on their shoulder or something prove. Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion, was able to use his fists to define more than his masculinity. He used them to publicly smash the notion that white boxers were superior by virtue of their race, and as Will Cooley notes in discussing his 1910 bout with Jim Jeffries, the fight "was seen as a symbolic battle for racial supremacy. When Johnson knocked out Jeffries, race riots broke out across the nation resulting in numerous deaths" (421). From time to time, boxing works to oppose hegemonic social practices (such as racism), and in those instances, the blood on the mat stands for direct, violent resistance to social injustice.

Trauma as Connective Scar Tissue Between the Body and Narratives of Nation and Region

Violence in *The Knockout Artist* generates the trauma that creates Eugene's abjection and discontinuity from hegemonic masculinity, and affords him opportunities to explore alternative masculine identities, but it also begs additional questions. If, as previously noted, violence and sport are essential components of American masculinity, and if masculinity is itself a kind of trauma, how does this connect to notions of regional and national identity? How do these ideas influence one another, and how does this influence interaction with constructions of white Southern masculinity? To answer these

questions, I want to examine American exceptionalism as a primary contact point between social practices and individual bodies, as the ideological coordinate of the connective scar tissue that results from the trauma that is white Southern masculinity. Donald Pease defines exceptionalism as “a political doctrine as well as a regulatory fantasy that enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity,” a fantasy necessary “to solicit its citizenry’s assent to its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence” (11-12). As Pease points out, the primary purpose of American exceptionalism is to legitimize violence from the top down--from the ideological foundations of the nation and the interpolative social processes that organize and legitimize the social practices of states to the individual lives of its citizens. Richard Howson goes a step further and regards violence and aggression as the most crucial aspect of “masculine authoritarianism,” a deployment of violence used to overcome challenges to masculine dominance (76). Turned on its head, it is the application of violence, and the exceptions which permit its application, that place an individual safely within the confines of the “regulatory fantasy,” the sense of one’s place within the local, regional, and national identity, and the grace (the masculine authoritarianism) that identity maintains by nature of its very existence. Without blood sport--without violence--this interpellation into the regulatory fantasy could not be embodied and regulated, for as Simon Creak notes, “physical culture, particularly sport, is among the most important means of substantializing notions of the body, masculinity, and the nation in modern societies” (12).

The cohesion of violence to personal and national identity is, if not totalizing, then unyielding, tenacious. When Eugene accepts an offer to knock himself out for two

thousand dollars, Charity responds with: “My God, they may want you to open a vein for that kind of money” (89). And when Eugene resolves to send the money to his parents, he notes that “[h]alf the farms in Georgia had already gone under from the deep depression that had struck agriculture, but his daddy’s farm, as sorry as it was, was going to remain in the family” (90). Here, the past of Eugene’s rural upbringing and the present, economically dependent on self-injury, relies on preserving the family farm, a dim prospect in the era during which the novel takes place. The “deep depression” to which Eugene refers is a culmination of what Hugh Ulrich calls a decades-long enshrinement of New Deal populist and Reagan Era dogma that reduced America’s population to “1-2 percent of the U.S. population” (250). In *Losing Ground* (1989), Ulrich offers a scathing critique of two centuries worth of U.S. farm policy, concluding that by the late 1980s, a disastrous combination of legislation in favor of corporate farming, ineptitude on the part of the USDA, and failures in deterring topsoil erosion and groundwater depletion (to name a few factors) all made small family farms unviable (250).

Ulrich is far from alone in this opinion. For example, nearly a decade prior to the publication of Ulrich’s study, Ingolf Vogeler declared: “Family farming is a myth” (9). His exhaustive study, *The Myth of the Family Farm* (1981) compiles statistical, topographical, and economic data to arrive at nearly identical conclusions to those later posited by Ulrich. More pertinent to *The Knockout Artist*, Vogeler frames the problems faced by small family farms as structural in nature, and warns that “[a]lthough they control the basic ingredients of land and labor, their lack of control over capital, technology, and innovations renders them powerless as capitalists and landlords” (289).

Ironically, what has “struck” agriculture has also struck Eugene--namely that the violence intended to save the family farm (a well-worn cliché about which Crews was no doubt aware) is the same used to recreate, night after night, the traumatic destruction of Eugene’s boxing career and masculinity. Both the money he sends home and the violence necessary to generate funds are fruitless; the family farm cannot be saved from disastrous national policy and agribusiness any more than Eugene’s masculine identity can be pieced back together. The farm becomes symbolic of the homespun Southern identity Eugene strives to save through violence, a physical place *and* a state of being to which he can never return *as a result* of that same violence. In this way *The Knockout Artist* asks us to more carefully examine the application of violence in the consolidation of personal and national identities, and to detect in the relationship of this doctrine the presence of the grotesque, the assertion of American exceptionalism writ on the body of Eugene.

The violence that lies at the heart of white Southern masculinity is representative of a deeper, larger trauma, one that also lies at the heart of American exceptionalism. Pease notes that “American exceptionalism is a transgenerational state of fantasy, and like a family secret it bears the traces of a transgenerational trauma. Resembling an ongoing nightmare into which we occasionally awakened, this transgenerational trauma bore the psychic reality of the obscene underside to the victory culture that was structured in the fantasy of American exceptionalism” (38). Transgenerational trauma refers to the enduring legacy of American violence used to consolidate white empire, the trauma endured by those othered by dominant social orders, and those dominated through violence. The violence Eugene dished out in the boxing ring was symbolic of

this, but turned against himself *by* himself, it offers him the perspective (however incomplete) of the dominated. Symbolically speaking, concussed by his own fist, Eugene tastes on a personal level what dominated groups of people experience on a national level, and begins to experience what Pease calls a “revolutionary moment,” one in which “images from an unacknowledged past suddenly burst into the present as if rising from the wrongs suffered at the hands of dominant fantasy” (39). Such moments occur in *The Knockout Artist*, particularly when Eugene ponders whether or not one can ever divest oneself of such trauma:

As he always did, Eugene glanced toward the entrance of the zoo and thought of the lions, thought of them pacing the little stream there under the inconstant gaze of the tourists hanging over the railing at the top of the impossibly high stone wall of the cage that was not a cage but their natural habitat that they could never leave, not even for an instant. But, Eugene thought, if he had gotten out of his own cage, nothing was impossible. (225)

Eugene’s identification with the lions seems straight-forward. Much as they are trapped within a “cage that was not a cage,” he, too, has spent his life “pacing,” a phrase that could just as well apply to a boxer moving around the ring, a lion circling inside its cage, or an individual suddenly thrust into the deeper, contested arena of grotesque articulation. The guy is, after all, just an “ex-pug” from a Georgia “dirt farm,” his “natural habitat” that, like the lions in their cage, he can “never leave” --not with masculinity intact. This convergence of identity markers signifies one of many ways in which a stigmatized South is defined as both a heritage *and* a cage-like prison, a vista from which national “tourists” may spectate the carnival that is the South.

This might, under certain circumstances, be taken for evidence of Southern exceptionalism, the notion that the South (and particularly New Orleans) is a never-ending carnival when compared to the larger national geo-political makeup of the United

States. As Lassiter and Crespino note, Southern exceptionalism relies on a specific narrative thread of American exceptionalism (and often vice versa), that of “a story of white racial innocence . . . of a benevolent superpower . . . of an essentially liberal national project” (7). Notions of racial superiority are the beating heart of Southern exceptionalism, a narrative (“story”) in which benevolent white Southerners shepherd other races toward the “national project” of reinforcing white dominance under the guise of betterment. This national project is far from new; Cassuto locates its presence, for example, in Melville’s *Typee* (1846), and argues that the novel helps us better understand the American freak show as it relates to racial objectification. Cassuto links tattooing, blackness, and freaks into the larger American discourse of racial and economic stratification that divides “ourselves into better and worse, into human and not human” (199).

Like boxing, freaks and freak shows are texts improvised in action, spectacles that confront all involved in a central question: What exactly *is* a human being? Leslie Fiedler concludes his classic book on the subject, *Freaks* (1978), by comparing freakishness with the “absurdity of being, however we define it, fully human” (347). Fiedler argues that freak spectacles reflect an uncomfortable need to define humanity in opposition to monstrosity and deformity, and much American literature, from Melville to Crews, grapples with this quandary. In *The Knockout Artist*, freakishness cannot resolve the matter of humanity; nearly everyone in the novel is a freak, and the definition of humanity is a matter of grotesque spectacle, a series of carnival performances that range from Eugene’s self-administered KOs to snuff films and more. A similar range of attitudes prevails with regards to Southern exceptionalism: the South

is a bad, degenerate, backward site so the United States beyond it can be identified as good, and at the same time, the South is focal point of unique, atemporal culture that emphasizes hospitality, gentility, and highly stratified social and economic stations that sustain the notion of American (and Southern) exceptionalism. The novel's dismal views of rural Southern life (the Georgia dirt farm), and its emphasis on the carnivalesque freakishness of New Orleans leans into the former portrayal, but it can hardly be said to paint the rest of the US in a flattering light; the "tourists" that gawk at the lions are precisely that, tourists, visitors to a place (the South, New Orleans) from which they do not hail, and their scopophilic joy at caged animals is disturbingly similar to the audience's at the snuff film. Sylvia Kelso calls this aspect of the grotesque, this shifting, back-and-forth energy, a "border zone . . . an unstable site of contest and negotiation, whose signification slides [T]he grotesque will not stay still in either definition or perception . . . [it] is immediately pulled in one of two opposing ways" (107). The grotesque is a medial and bodily site of instability; it maintains in constant tension the incompatibles of which it is comprised, but the effect of such intense discomfort can, in certain circumstances, urge a subject toward liminality, articulation, the recognition of self as subject *and* object, or freak *and* human, and then to exert that outward.

This is the source of alterity nestled in the heart of the grotesque, what Bakhtin calls its theme of madness that allows us to "escape the false 'truth of this world' in order to look at the world with eyes free from this 'truth'" (49). In such moments the body's ability to act as a signifier of the public body, of bodies that exist within a given political framework of social practices, may allow for revolutionary moments of grotesque intervention. Bakhtin reminds us that the grotesque body "never presents an

individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body . . . the grotesque body is cosmic and universal” (318).

Revolutionary moments for the grotesque body highlight the potential for similar “universal” moments of transgression, revolution, and subversion on the larger, social level. *The Knockout Artist* contextualizes such moments through pain, violence, and trauma. For men like Eugene Biggs, men whose whole lives revolve around the deployment of violence and trauma, this alterity represents both a growing awareness of masculinity as trauma *and* the potential, however difficult or unlikely, to effect change on the self and others.

Freaks, Deviants, and Potential Alterity

Earlier, I briefly described freaks and freak shows as grotesque confrontations with the definition of humanity, and I want to further unpack freaks in order to better contextualize their significance in *The Knockout Artist*. Of course, *The Knockout Artist* is far from Crews’s only novel to prominently employ freakish bodies in precisely such a fashion. Nicholas Spencer summarizes Crews’s fiction as hyper-focused on the interaction between freakish bodies and social practices, noting that his “representation of the body is one of the most consistent features of Crews’s fiction. Most obviously, Crews often writes about freaks with deviant and disfigured bodies Whereas the representation of freaks may seem to rely on a conception of the body’s essential qualities, evocations of usually public ordeals treat the body as inseparable from social codes” (134). Freakish bodies are grotesque bodies that evoke social codes and practices; their disfigurement, their deviancy--explicit or otherwise--reflects dominant or hegemonic categories in their inversion of such categories. Bakhtin locates the origin of

this association between freakish, grotesque bodies and confrontation with social orders in Renaissance humanism that placed the body at the center of philosophical inquiry that sought to decentralize medieval hierarchic thinking (362). According to Cassuto, American freak shows coalesced in the nineteenth century and arose “roughly in tandem with the museum” (180). David Wall links the rise of American freak shows to increased scientific inquiry of the era until P.T. Barnum harnessed the freakish bodies into commercial spectacle (527). In nineteenth-century America, freakish bodies challenged established bodily norms and pre-determined notions of what was and was not commercially viable on a large scale; in true ambiguous fashion, grotesque freak shows flaunted social norms and embraced emerging capitalist commoditization of human spectacle. As Rune Grauland points out, freaks and grotesque bodies both are and are not recognizably human--they violate categories of classification and inhabit liminal social identities (343). While freaks like Eugene stand apart from traditionally dominant men, their very ability to do so draws attention to how freakishness and deviancy is coded for men, and how masculinity works to crystallize this idea in bodies; more importantly, the qualities that make Eugene a freak are not unique to him, but part and parcel of masculinity itself, manifested through, and mediated by, violence and trauma.

In depicting the relationship between violence, trauma, and masculinity as one of friction between social codes and bodies, *The Knockout Artist* depicts freaks that do not rely on the exteriority of their deformity to register as such. Eugene isn't a freak because his body is deformed--on the contrary, he is, the text tells us, “startlingly handsome” and often confused for this or that famous actor (3). Instead, he's a freak because his body's

limitations prevent him from performing hegemonic masculinity much less constituting it as an identity. As Eugene grapples with his masculinity on a personal level, he also grapples with the social practices that direct the construction, consolidation, and reification of hegemonic masculinity in subjects, with patriarchy to put it simply. In *The Gender of Oppression* (1987), Jeff Hearn describes patriarchy as a collection of practices simultaneously organized at the individual and public levels, and he points out that cultural pressure to embody hegemonic masculinity is not uncommon, even among men's solidarity groups committed to anti-sexist praxis (174). The key to resolving such pressure, according to Hearn, is to look for practices that draw critical attention to the ways in which solidarity becomes (potentially lethal) competition, and to find within those tensions opportunities for "the growth of non-oppressive, loving practice by men *between the public and the private worlds*" (174). Hearn's emphasis conveys the significance of examining patriarchy as a deployment of male power "from the ways of the private world to the public" (166). Patriarchy, much like national and regional exceptionalism, is dependent upon essentialisms reified through praxis--in this case, violence. But when that violence and its resultant trauma expose the potential for alterity in praxis, deviancy, here defined as a willingness to explore non-dominant constructions of masculinity becomes that outlet for "non-oppressive" practice.

The deviancy Eugene embodies, and the suffering it elicits from him, highlights what Michael Kaufman calls the contradictory experience of power men encounter in patriarchy (150). He writes:

Men's pain and the way we exercise power are not just symptoms of our current gender order. Together they shape our sense of manhood, for masculinity has become a form of alienation. Men's alienation is our ignorance of our own emotions, feelings, needs, and potential for human connection and nurturance.

Our alienation also results from our distance from women and our distance and isolation from other men. (150)

The application of violence is the application of power, but as we see with Eugene, and with several of the men in *The Knockout Artist*, if trauma fails to (correctly) prompt capitulation, it may result in grotesque articulation, in a sense of alienation and distance from (him)self as (him)self. This “distance” Kaufman talks about is more than spatial and emotional but also subjective, applicable to the ways in which race, class, and gender are consolidated with nation and region into a composite notion of selfhood, i.e. a *Southern white man*. As Kaufman puts it, “It is a strange situation when men’s very real power and privilege in the world hinges not only on that power but also on an experience of alienation and powerlessness” (151). If the concepts of marginalization and alienation are baked into modern Southern fiction, and certainly into Crews’s work, they are part and parcel of larger discourses of power on the level of social orders *and* the personal, private realm of the body.

Together, narratives of power and dominant social constructions generate more than national or regional identity. They generate the determining qualification for humanity, often expressed through what Gail Bederman calls the “discourse of civilization”:

Race, gender, and power ‘Civilization’ wove these attributes together by rooting them in a progressive, millennial tale of human history. On this level, ‘civilization’ was a recognizable and coherent set of ideas and practices, shared by man, if not most, middle- and upper-class Americans at the turn of the century. Yet despite this ostensible coherence, the discourse of civilization had no intrinsic political meaning. (217)

This discourse of civilization relies on specific configurations of race, gender, and power as determined by dominant groups to assert legitimacy. Masculinity, as it developed

from nineteenth century manhood, was rooted in definitions and assertions of middle-class, white, male identity. That this construction of identity could be bifurcated into a Southern masculinity, a northern masculinity, and so forth, is neither surprising nor unique, but merely another deployment of socio-political power from the dominant to the dominated, a delineation from the top down about who is who and *why*.

It is grotesque, then, that violence and trauma may also serve as the vehicle by which to articulate subversion to the discourses of civilization, power, and dominance. As Bederman points out, there is “no intrinsic political meaning” to the discourse of civilization, no essential or inherent truth. Much like narratives of national and regional exceptionalism that mirror and reinforce the relationship between dominant social practices and constructions of masculinities, destabilization is possible, and most probable, through subjective reconfiguration--through grotesque articulation. For the sake of clarity, let me say again that this is the core of what makes the grotesque so important: its ability to destabilize dominant systems of classification and power, and creates fissures for the possibility (though by no means a guarantee) of alterity. Eugene’s decision to quit knocking himself out and begin training Jacques, an up and coming Cajun boxer, expresses more than a desire to reduce the frequency of concussions. It highlights a deeper desire, one that stems from his bodily and subjective gender discontinuity to consider, or perhaps engage with, an alternative construction of masculine identity *from within* the dominant discourses of gender, class, region, nation, and civilization. It may in part be an attempt to reshape the past through a new generation, and it may also be an experiment to see if he can train Jacques to deploy violence in ways that don’t reinforce hegemonic masculinity (or in ways that don’t

continue to perpetuate the same traumas Eugene suffered). It may simply be an attempt to protect a young, vulnerable fighter from the predatory aspects of the profession.

When Eugene and Jacques return home one day after training, they find the apartment filled with the novel's motley cast of characters, and Eugene tells us: "This was not the place you wanted your fighter. These were not the people you wanted your fighter with" (227). Eugene's hindsight allows him to identify those surroundings and people that pose a threat to Jacques, those looking to take advantage of a young, trusting fighter and exploit him for their own gain. What Eugene sees in the depersonalized "the place" and "the people" are textual callbacks to the snuff film, its anonymous actors, and the equally anonymous audience and their sadistic, masochistic appetites.

Eugene finds in Jacques's company something radically different from the novel's cast of addicts, snuff-film buffs, and manipulators:

Eugene threw back his head and laughed with the sheer good feeling of being out in the bright, clean air of dawn, running over the damp grass with Jacques who was, as he always was, inevitably filled with hope and promise, strong and sure of himself. Anything seemed possible when he was with the kid. (223)

Unlike the self-administered blows that throw back Eugene's head, Jacques camaraderie brings "sheer good feelings," and the "clean" air of their outdoors environment (and their homosocial bond) contrasts with both the seedy, pornographic world Eugene has left behind and Charity's exploitative company. The "hope and promise" contained within Jacques are indications that, along with his ability to absorb blows to the chin that render Eugene unconscious, other subjective configurations, ones able to mitigate or push beyond the trauma of the past. Like Eugene, Jacques will be steeped in a sporting culture organized in part to reinforce the cycle of violence that underpins hegemonic white Southern masculinity. But through Jacques, Eugene

confronts the past and presents his trainee with opportunities mercifully free of the abandonment and emotional trauma. Like Jack Johnson's 1910 bout against Jim Jeffries, Jacques fights may mean more than masculine power posturing; then again, maybe not. Much of trauma's power stems from its erasure of history, its ability to misdirect attention away from continuing pain to the moment of traumatic inception that refuses recognition (Caruth 132). For Eugene, Jacques is both an acknowledgment of past trauma and the embodiment of potential new history.

"We Got Somethin" and the Sham That Is Destiny

Like many of the themes present in *The Knockout Artist*, trauma and its lasting effects permeate much of Crews's work, and provides a critical junction between the experience of the artist (Crews) and the reader. As Crews himself puts it when discussing the point of art, "If I were inclined to have it do anything at all, I would want for it to turn the reader back upon himself, to provoke him to examine himself" (Aronson 271). Trauma in *The Knockout Artist* provokes Eugene into inward examination, but it also directs his attention outward to examine the social practices that set the terms for the construction of masculine identity. This emphasis on personal and social scrutiny is integral to Crews's work, for as Long points out, "Crews writes not about success, but of false hopes and failures. He seems to debunk bootstrap individualism as a harmful illusion . . . Crews exposes the emptiness of America's obsession with individualized destiny" (49). Sport plays an important role in this analysis of "false hopes and failures." While physical prowess and athleticism are vital components of hegemonic masculinity, athletic competition, even blood sport, "typically facilitates the development of coherent and fulfilling narratives of self. In contrast, sport can be understood as a context of

competing discourses that produce a diversity of masculinities and femininities and, at times, ethical dilemmas and identity tensions” (Pringle and Hickey 116). Sports provides the medium for Eugene’s trauma, the ring into which he literally and figuratively engages in combat with dominant social practices.

The boxing ring operates as the arena in which dominant constructions of identity are brutally reinforced onto bodies, but it also operates as a site of contested identity. Not long after teaming up with Pete to train Jacques, Eugene discovers that Pete has blown their small nest-egg of funds on drugs and prostitution in the hopes of getting his girlfriend, Tulip, clean. When Eugene confronts Pete, he realizes that his partner’s apartment has become yet another scene of pornographic excess, and decides enough is enough:

“No,” said Eugene, but he did not mean no, that dope was not expensive or that Pete did not have to have the money or that he could not get Tulip clean or that he did not love her. He only meant No. It was one of the few utterly clear moments in his life when he was able to say exactly what he meant, exactly. “No,” he said. (261-62)

Unable to accurately convey his anguish and rage, Eugene condenses the totality of anger and dejection into a single utterance of negation: “No.” Similar to how trauma nullified Eugene’s ability to align with dominant constructions of masculinity, it has--here at the moment where it threatens to once again engulf him, Pete, and their young prospect Jacques--produced yet another moment of subjective discontinuity. His “No” is aimed at the pornographic scene arrayed before him, another reflection of who and what men like Pete and him have become, what the trauma that is masculinity (its centering on violence, its legacy of brutality, and its effect as a historical force of domination through violent domination) has helped to engender. This “utterly clear”

moment is the culmination of what began when Eugene felt “burned clean” by subjective nullification; the destruction of the personal has led, now, here, to a rejection of the public, to a confrontation and refutation of the societal ills that, like masculinity, iterate themselves anew in traumatized bodies.

In saying “No,” Eugene refuses to perpetrate the same cycle of trauma on his trainee, Jacques. At the novel’s close, Eugene, now desperate to get out of town, tells Jacques to do the same thing:

“I’d explain but I can’t explain. Too much, too twisted, Jacques. Listen to me now. Listen close. You in a trick of shit here. You got to get out, too. Everybody you’ve met, everybody, Pete, Charity, even Tulip, is bad, bad news from the ground up. Some of it ain’t their fault. That ain’t the point. They locked into whatever they locked into, but you ain’t locked into it. Yet. But you will be. Believe it. Get out. Away. Now. I don’t care where you go, just go.” (268)

Eugene’s inability to explain the gravity of the situation reminds us of trauma’s resistance to being concretely captured in language. The temporal and affective nature of trauma can’t be articulated in language because it is, in the Bakhtinian sense, degraded into flesh. This is the duplicitous “trick of shit” that threatens Jacques and Eugene, a warning that implies the severity and strength of the trauma that lurks in their own corner, behind the next punch, or gripped in the next fist aimed at their faces. The social and personal forces that relegated Eugene to the status of a pornographic curio now surround Jacques, and they are not solely intangible, abstract concepts. In a sense, characters like Charity, Pete, Tulip, and Bud don’t simply represent various aspects of dominant social practices; they *are* those social practices, captured in grotesque form (“Too much, too twisted”).

What Eugene struggles to capture in language can be located in bodily experience, in the carrying of trauma through time, and, similarly, through pain. In *The*

Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry discusses how the bodily experience of pain directly conflicts with its expressibility and works to destroy one's conception of subjecthood in a larger world. She writes, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language . . . Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). But rather than argue that trauma destroys language or obstructs communicability through "unsharability," I suggest that trauma itself is far from a singular phenomenon, that its temporal nature invites a continuous process of re-examination of self that promotes what Balaev describes as "reorientation," a process in which an individual's reality is reorganized in a new set of relations to the dominant constructions (39). Trauma creates new opportunities for language, expression, and subjective configuration that gets beyond "the traditional model that insists upon the subject's fragmentation" (Balaev 39). In other words, trauma acts as its own language, one that captures the inexpressibility of pain and suffering in bodies as "the wound that cries out . . . trying to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 14). In Eugene's case, it captures, however cryptically, the nature of what threatens Jacques. His attempt, however, is not fruitless. Jacques tells Eugene that they can leave together, and despite Eugene's heart being "cold against the world," he realizes it is "not in him to do Jacques wrong" (269). Pain may be incommunicable, but trauma provides new avenues of human connection.

Likewise, what Jacques cannot adequately communicate, but that nonetheless underlines his offer of friendship, is an acknowledgement of the way violence and

masculinity are linked, and how that pairing is directly connected to the trauma Eugene carries with him. This becomes apparent in the novel's final exchange as Eugene clarifies their situation:

All right. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. But he had to try one last time. "I got nothing, Jacques. No place to go, really. No plans. No money. No future. You come with me, we got nothing."

Jacques said: "We got somethin."

"What we got, Jacques?"

Jacques held up his fists. "We got dese." (269)

Eugene's discontinuity is reinforced by the repetitive negation ("No") of identifying markers of "place," class ("money"), and a "future." Eugene's is an existence truly at the edge of subjectivity, one in which the dominant, most visible sign posts of his region, nation, and masculinity are but distant, blurry outlines. What he and Jacques have, their "fists," are tacit reminders of the role violence played--and continues to play--in shaping their lives. Lodged at the end of the dialog exchange, the "dese" may refer to what Robinson calls the plurality of masculine identities that sport makes possible through its homosociality, the toll it takes on men's bodies, and its relation to women's increasing participation in sports--including boxing and contact blood sports (34-35). What Jacques and Eugene possess is the capacity for violence, the "fists" capable of inflicting upon others the kind of life-altering trauma Eugene has endured and that Jacques will, we hope, avoid. But the plural pronoun "we" indicates a cooperative effort: Much as Eugene has trained Jacques to use violence to support himself financially, the process has allowed the former to confront the source of his trauma by returning to a facsimile of its inception and preventing another man from suffering a similar fate. Jacques is more than a double to Eugene. He represents an opportunity to confront the trauma of the

past, acknowledge its effects, and move beyond them, through the discontinuity of hegemonic masculinity and into the potential for alterity.

The ending of *The Knockout Artist* ties up very few loose ends. Eugene and Jacques are set to leave town, and Crews declines to offer any hint of the duo's success or failure. It's a reminder that challenging hegemonic social practices isn't easy, and results can be difficult to evaluate. Russell West warns us that a hegemonic social order, particularly under capitalism, is inclined to "co-opt all apparent threats to its dominance, including those of transformed gender configurations. The diversification of masculinity appears all too often not as a genuine challenge to hegemonic masculinity, but as a fetishized differentiation which channels possible challenges to gender hegemony into mere consumption" (22). So, too, should we exercise caution when taking for granted any correlation between narratives of trauma and alterity; as Alan Gibbs notes, theorists and critics, including Caruth, "may have exaggerated the alleged subversive qualities of what has in fact become a codified way of representing trauma" (158). There is, in other words, a very real risk that the exploration of alternative masculinities within a capitalist hegemony produces no revolutionary moment, and that the discontinuity Eugene experiences leads to nothing more than a reinforcement of the social practices that have caused him so much anguish. In such a scenario, all the violence and trauma analyzed above is mere pornography, stimulating entertainment in which alterity becomes, at best, an unlikely outcome overwhelmed by the approaching climax to provide sadistic and masochistic pleasure for a rapt, cheering audience.

Nonetheless, I believe in the power of grotesque transgressions and their ability to create fissures of alterity in dominant discourses of gender and identity. The

grotesque makes a better, more hopeful future possible, and the novel's deposition of trauma asks for a deeper, uncomfortable consideration of its themes. At the very least--and I think Crews would agree--*The Knockout Artist*, like the grotesque mode itself, asks us to do more than just talk. It demands collective action to challenge dominant narratives of gender and region, and it demands normative forms be confronted not only in media, but in contested arenas of culture, in boxing rings, football stadiums, and weight racks at the gym. Most of all, it demands discomfort (which is precisely what such a conversation about this topic *will* create at the squat rack), and a critical examination of men and men's bodies and the subjective constructs that prop up masculinities (and masculinities as embodied by women). It demands change. As its discomfort slips over the body, it asks what Crews himself asks: "To hell with what you say--what did you *do*, Jack? What did you do? How did you act?" (Lytal and Russell 541).

Chapter 2. Grotesque Contradictions in Barry Hannah's *Ray*

Contradiction is the operative word of this chapter, and the term applies as much to the analysis of a text as it does the author under consideration, the late, much lauded Barry Hannah. Fred Hobson calls Hannah "the boldest, zaniest, and most outrageous writer of the contemporary South . . . a chronicler of the craziest edges" of the world (32). Anna Baker, meanwhile, recalls Hannah as a teacher and mentor, someone who nurtured her talent and urged her to approach the world with a sense of wonder and a spirit of generosity (5). Baker's remembrance, particularly when paired with Hobson's characterization of Hannah's work, bring into focus the contradictory nature of Hannah's work. But in talking critically about Hannah's fiction, Ruth Weston provides what I believe to be the best summary:

When I began my research on Hannah, I had been strangely fascinated by his fiction for several years, puzzling over his complex stories; marveling at his mastery at storytelling and his virtuosity with language; and yet, as a woman and a feminist, horrified by his depiction of, and his characters' treatment of, women. My reaction was at least as strong as that of David Madden, who, after reading *Geronimo Rex*, said, "I simultaneously loved the effect of and despised the sensibility behind each line." Hannah's is not a "politically correct" fiction; but what deserving of the name of literature is? (1)

Hannah's fiction is, as Weston notes, unconcerned with political correctness, and his depiction of women often relegates them to objects of sexual desire, temptresses, or potential conquests--sometimes, all at once. It's more than understandable that there is a violent quality to Weston's reaction, a whiplash between attraction and repulsion that highlights what I argue is the essential mode of Hannah's work: the grotesque. His fiction "shows the contemporary human, especially the contemporary male, embroiled in all the desperate hilarity required to make a brave show" (Weston 9). Very often, the "desperate hilarity" in Hannah's work ridicules as much as celebrates men's "brave

show;" his stories and novels approach their subjects with compassion, yes, but also with ambiguity about how readers will react and relate to them.

In this chapter, I'll explore how the grotesque is deployed in Barry Hannah's *Ray* (1980) to examine how the novel embraces and critically examines the grotesque contradictions of white Southern masculinity as defined by desire, fidelity, and self-destructive impulses. With an emphasis on grotesque feasting and carnival revelry, *Ray* charts the twisted, hopelessly knotted construct of white Southern masculinity, the damage it does to men and women alike, and its connection to Lost Cause mythology. Taken together, the novel posits masculinity not as a specific, definite gender construct, but as a crisis of historical proportions, one that connects disparate nineteenth century ideals of manhood to contemporary class consciousness before ripping that, too, to shreds. Ultimately, *Ray* explores white Southern masculinity of the 70s and early 80s from a variety of angles, all of them embodied in the multi-faceted protagonist (Ray himself), and arrives at no specific construction of masculine identity as *the* construction. That's not to say that *Ray* doesn't grapple with hegemonic masculinity--it often does in ways that present it as lacking, incomplete, or insufficient to explain and contain the disparate constructions of masculinity found within the novel. Ultimately, *Ray* finds all of these constructions, hegemonic and otherwise, lacking, and offers us a view of masculinity as a grotesque condition of crisis in which no singular construction (and likely no composite of various constructions) can stymie the subjective confusion men experience while embodying such fragmented identities

I've chosen *Ray* for its brevity and density: At a mere 113 pages, it nonetheless manages to pack in an astounding amount of content. As Hannah's third novel, *Ray*

represents a major change to Hannah's work. His 1972 debut, the critically celebrated *Geronimo Rex*, occasionally flirts with grotesque humor, and the follow-up, *Nightwatchmen* (1973), offers a slightly slimmer, considerably more grotesque work, though it failed to elicit the critical and commercial success of its predecessor. By the late 1970s, Hannah had been paired with famed editor Gordon Lish, and the impact on his work was noticeable; *Ray*, like the collection of short stories that precedes it, *Airships* (1978), is a tight, streamlined text that fully embraces the narrative and creative flair for which Hannah came to be known. *Ray* embraces the comic grotesque as their central narrative mode, and continues *Airships*'s emphasis on liars, tricksters, and unreliable narrators. The titular "old liars" in "Water Liars," the lead-off story in *Airships* and originally published in *Esquire*, spend their days on a pier, telling "big loose ones" about ghosts and legendary exploits of fisherman real and imagined (3). As characters who feel compelled to lie and bend the truth at every turn, these "old liars" prefigure Raymond Forrest, the protagonist of *Ray* whose lies, mistruths, and general tendency toward fantasy and hyperbole render pretty much everything he tells readers suspect. Later novels, such as *The Tennis Handsome* (1983) and the abundantly grotesque *Never Die* (1991) reel in the narrative and thematic reliance on misdirection and outright deception, leaning respectively on deranged family and professional dynamics and comically grotesque bodies. *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) weds these themes in a sprawling postmodern exploration of geography, faith, and madness, and serves as a kind of terminal point in Hannah's creative corpus; the emphasis on bodies and region that begins in *Airships* and *Ray* concludes in Hannah's final novel as religious, almost mystical introspection. But more than any of Hannah's other words, *Ray* offers a

focused, emphatic vertical slice of the themes and ideas Hannah pursued over three decades of writing--men, their bodies, and their masculine identities in a South undergoing seismic socio-political change, an ongoing discourse of gender, region, and identity that dominated Hannah's work until his death. The novel's unique narrative structure, emphasis on the impact of history and region on gender identity, and its use of the comic grotesque to tie this all together makes it particularly noteworthy and serves as an ideal focal point for the study of Hannah's work.

Ray is the story of Raymond Forrest, a physician and family man whose happy home life is contrasted with gruesome flashbacks of past lives fighting in the Confederate South and Vietnam and his many extra-marital affairs. These flashbacks are treated in two distinct ways. Flashbacks to the Civil War are perhaps better designated as glimpses into Ray's past life, narrative lapses in which a hypothetical (or real, considering *Ray* is rarely concerned with distinguishing historical fact from fiction) Ray of the past and a Ray of the present are one and the same. In this scenario, memories of Ray from the past are accessible to Ray in the present, and act as commentaries upon his present state; as Ray of the present suffers crippling depression, grapples with suicidal impulses, and tries to reconcile his love for his wife with his copious bouts of infidelity, so, too, do the Ray and the South of the past deteriorate, the pair becoming ever less distinct and definite. The sections that deal with Ray's time as a fighter pilot in Vietnam, however, are often (but not always) matter-of-fact battlefield reports, intended to represent events the Ray of the present experienced. Told in chapters that range from a single sentence to a few pages, *Ray's* fragmentary narrative eschews linear storytelling in favor of relentless dynamism; of all of Hannah's

novels, it may be the most obviously postmodern in its construction, the most consciously aware of itself as faulty narrative (*Ray* is, it should be noted, a liar) that sutures past to present, body to region, and gender to history in complicated self-inquiry. Often, postmodern American literature is aware of itself as a historical artifact of a *time*, one artifact of many in a larger socio-historical collection of trends, ideas, and discourses. According to Mark Currie, this narrative and thematic awareness, this metafictional aspect extends beyond consideration of texts and directly engages a reader's identity (28). Postmodern metafiction, Currie argues, engages readers in a state of protracted interpellation wherein the need to consider the nuances of fictional characters and situations forces them to likewise consider, and potentially adopt, new subject positions (28). Much as *Ray* is a story about a man desperate to understand who and what he is, it prompts the reader to ask similar questions, as is evident from the opening lines: "Ray, you are a doctor and you are in a hospital in Mobile, except now you are a patient but you're still me. Say what? You say you want to know who I am?" (3). This is the central question of *Ray*, one directed at the reader as much as the protagonist.

But despite the serious nature of the aforementioned questions, *Ray* is also a novel of cartoonish proportions, a grotesque mixture of carnival revelry and gruesome murder, misogyny and feminine worship that confronts master narratives about what it means to be an upper class white man in the South in the late 1970s. Rather than approach the region as intrinsically exceptional place, *Ray* is surprisingly critical of the South; even in the Civil War flashbacks, the racial and class composition of its characters is bent to reflect the significantly more cosmopolitan (though, of course, far

from egalitarian) South of the '70s. *Ray*, like Hannah himself, is both deeply entrenched in traditional romantic sensibilities of the South, men, and masculinity, and also deeply suspicious of such ideas. Fred Hobson describes the author, and *Ray* in particular, as follows:

In one respect, Hannah belongs to the guns-guts-and-glory world of southern thought: he is, among other things, a very *offensive* writer, or at least one whose characters talk casually about gooks, queers, and niggers and have yet to have their collective consciousness raised in regard to women. In another respect, it might be claimed, Hannah writes a critique of that southern world. In either case this is not a world overflowing with sweet reasonableness. Neither is it exactly the older benighted South. Rather, it is a world of Lear jets, fast cars, easy sex and drugs, high-tech rockabilly, new-style misogyny, and general social and cultural fragmentation--a postmodern South in which place, community, traditional family, and even class play little part . . . The narrative voice is slick, hip--and desperate. (36-37)

Hannah's vision of the South is under constant revision, a place that changes moment to moment, and demands its characters follow suit or get left behind. Clare Chadd's description of postsouthern writing is useful here as she notes that many contemporary Southern writers struggle to define a "vestigial sense of place" beyond notions and myths of a region whose aesthetics and culture have been thoroughly deconstructed (15). By and large, this is the "desperate" note Hobson locates in *Ray's* narrative, a reflective, yet suspicious tone about the nature of things that permeates the novel even in its slickest, most confident moments.

Ray is a novel about change, and more specifically about men changing in the midst of massive cultural and political transformation. In this way, the novel works to examine the South of the 1970s and 80s as a geographic locale in the throes of radical cultural, political, and economic change, a place that Jeffrey and Susan Folks describe as undergoing "an alienating metamorphosis, in less than fifty years, from a largely

provincial culture of smaller cities and towns into a region of suburban sprawl” (10).

Charles Bullock III et al see this metamorphosis as primarily racial, arguing that nothing has so fundamentally altered Southern politics as the increase of nonwhite populations (15). Hannah’s fiction is rarely explicitly concerned with race, and *Ray* is no exception; the novel treats the South in a manner that concurs with John Shelton Reed’s conclusion that the South is, politically, culturally, and in terms of its regional identity, “no longer a peculiar region” (175). Hannah’s exploration of the South is best described by Joanna Price as “largely concerned with exploring how an individual . . . can accommodate himself to the way in which such concepts [the nature of community, relations between men and women, the relation of an individual and a culture to ‘history’] are changing as they have ceased to be defined by regionally specific traditions and are increasingly being reshaped by the cultural and economic formations of postmodernity” (261). Rather than sit comfortably in some specific and definite definition of what white Southern masculinity entails, *Ray* elects to call the whole proposition into question--men, masculinities, and their fashioning in a world where desire has become the dominant marker of masculine identity, the bodily conduit through which Southern men are directed to hone and perfect their violent, fractious masculinities--and where, faced with the connection between those masculinities and regional myths, they are faced with destruction and mortality.

Desire and Grotesque Feasting

I begin by exploring how sexual desire and promiscuity, often in unresolved tension with marital and romantic fidelity, work to complicate white Southern masculinity in *Ray*. These themes and their stasis in tension generate contradictory constructions of

masculinities in the novel's male characters, and especially in the titular narrator and protagonist, Ray Forrest. In the novel, as is often the case in real life, sexual desire is about more than just sex. It's also about a desire to consolidate an embodiment of masculine power over women (through sexual conquest), a desire to penetrate into dominant social orders, and a desire to identify with, and finally confront, mythic narratives of Southern identity. As with many of Hannah's stories, desire is a primary theme of the text, and sexual desire, often captured in moments of grotesque feasting, becomes Hannah's primary vehicle through which to explore the contradictions innate to white Southern masculinity, the desire to conquer, subjugate, and achieve total dominance over women and one's own body while *also* embodying the socially and politically potent ideal of the family man, the happily married and productive member of a community. In other words, hegemonic masculinity in *Ray* encourages men to *be* men by engaging in monogamy and to also deviate from it at every opportunity.

Men in the novel, and certainly Ray himself, are encouraged to embody this contradiction without questioning its contradictory nature, and the narrative explores this tension and its implications primarily through sexual desire and extra-marital promiscuity. Ray is married to Westy, a woman he describes as possessing "an uncommon adventurous warmth to her, a crazy hope in her blue eyes, and a body that will keep a lover occupied. I was gone for her about first sight" (31). The "crazy hope" in Westy's eyes is what Ray hopes to locate in his marriage--a stable and lasting romantic partnership that never cools off in the bedroom (implied by the indefinite tense of "keep a lover occupied"). Ray may be "gone for her," and the novel often interjects passages of unadulterated praise for Westy, but the distant second subject of the sentence, the

anonymous “lover,” hints at his deep-rooted desire to seek sexual satisfaction outside of the bounds of his marriage. And that’s exactly what he does; at nearly every opportunity, Ray is unfaithful, driven by seemingly insatiable lust through which the narrative begins to explore how these conflicting drives shape masculinity, qualifying it according to its extra-marital virility *and* marital fidelity.

Early in the novel, Ray describes a singular encounter with Laurie Chalmers, an academic companion who emphasizes the contradictory nature of desire in the narrative. While attending a conference at Columbia University, Ray and Laurie dine together, then retire to Ray’s hotel room:

Laurie Chalmers disrobed and lay on her back on the bed and described herself as constantly starved--for food and liquor and Southerners. Her family was in Charleston, South Carolina, and she said she missed the South despite her job, that was high-paying. She was an anesthetist.

She was a gorgeous and restless lady, with an amazing amount of beard around her sex. While she talked to me, she chewed a corner of her pillow. . . . She ate me, just like another delicious thing on her menu. I felt rotten, cool, and unfaithful, yet I came with an enormous lashing of sperm, which made her writhe and lick. Then Laurie Chalmers fell sound asleep. (36-37)

Ray’s delivery (not to mention Hannah’s sentence structure) reinforces the comparison between bodies and consumable food items. In a grotesque parody of a feast, she eats Ray (“She ate me”), and the first-person objective pronoun “me” becomes at the sentence’s end a “thing,” an object. Laurie hungers not for Ray, but for what he represents, “Southerners,” the consumption of which satiates her true desire--to recapture and revisit that which she misses: the South. Scott Romine reminds us that consumption, even in foodways studies, is not simply about the ingestion of food, but often about ingesting an “imagined memory” that includes a sense of cultural belonging, place, and identity (“God and the MoonPie” 51). Here, the loss or lack of Southernness

is categorically undesirable; Laurie Chalmers *wants* to ingest “it” despite the enormous ambiguity of that pronoun, and if I, like Romine, argue that narratives of “cultural loss . . . are equally legible as narratives of cultural *detoxification*,” then I also argue that Chalmers’s hunger is a bodily desire to detoxify from her cultural not-Southernness (“God and the MoonPie” 51). Lust, then, is not simply about sating carnal desire, but about reincorporating oneself (in this case, Laurie) into a regional culture and identity. Symbolically, the sperm that makes Laurie “writhe and lick” is potent not in bodily proteins and procreative potential, but in *identity*.

I want to briefly unpack the term “feast” both as it relates to the story and Bakhtin and as it operates more broadly as a category of actions in our real-world societies. Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden define “feast” as a rubric for various cultural practices that all converge on a singular activity: the communal consumption of food and drink (3). They argue that feasts are ritual activities, acts of consumption that (among other things) integrate the symbolic with the body and consummate a body’s connection to the cultural practices that inform a feast’s meaning (3-4). Bakhtin reminds us that the connection between the grotesque and images of food, drink, and their consumption are “closely interwoven with the grotesque body . . . connected with those of the body and of procreation (fertility, growth, birth)” (279). Ray posits sexual desire as consumption not simply of other bodies, but of the regional and cultural markers of identity embodied in flesh. Sexual consummation becomes symbolic feasting, an act that likewise reincorporates an individual into a regional (and, as we’ll see later, mythic) identity. The grotesque elements of the scene further reinforce this merging of bodies and place. Laurie’s pubic hair is described as a “huge beard,” an image that posits her genitals as

yet another mouth, and her body as (along with Ray's) a grotesque body. The mouth is a crucial symbol in the grotesque, for it is in the mouth that man "tastes the world, introduces it into his body, and makes it part of himself Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant" (Bakhtin 281). There's a lot of joy to be had in this scene; Laurie's consumption leads her to fall fast asleep, and Ray's cartoonishly large orgasm, his "enormous lashing of sperm," seems, in the moment, triumphant. But at the same time, the "lashing" and subsequent writhing connotes violent dominance found in the relationship between a white male slaveholder and an oppressed woman. *Ray* may not be overtly equating a Jewish woman engaged in consensual sex to conditions suffered by slaves of the antebellum South, but it nonetheless acknowledges the sexual gratification Ray finds in an act that pantomimes the brutal historical reality of race and gender relations in the South. Even in moments of life-affirming pleasure, white masculinity finds grotesque pleasure in symbolic recreations of domination.

Sexual desire, consummated in acts of grotesque feasting, acts as an origin point for this grotesque white masculinity. As Ray himself tells us, "Whoever created Ray gave him a big sex engine. I live near the Black Warrior River and have respect for things" (46). Alone among Ray's achievements and talents, his "sex engine," given outlandish significance through the preceding "big," takes center stage. It also precedes the personal pronoun "I" which is connected to region, to the "Black Warrior River" near which he lives. More than simply being the most important attribute of masculinity, sexual desire defines a man as a man through its link to place, region, and the consumption of bodies. Men's bodies are sites of hegemonic reification, for themselves

and for others, and are desired as much for sexual gratification as for their ability to consolidate, for themselves and their sexual partners, a mythical Southern identity. Sexual desire culminates in consumption of bodies and signifiers of identity, *Ray* tells us, and in doing so helps to reveal what Bakhtin referred to as the “free and frank truth [that] can be said only in the atmosphere of the banquet, only in table talk” (285). In *Ray*, table talk is pillow talk, and it is a discourse of desire, a grotesque commingling of sexual and subjective appetites that reflects how we are consumed even as we consume others, and how these acts of consumption are also acts of incorporation through reduction and objectification.

Though the scene with Laurie Chalmers explicitly emphasizes the connection between sex and consumption (Ray is eaten as a kind of Southern delicacy), later scenes reinforce the idea that consumption is *necessary* for the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity. For example, we see this in Chapter XV when Ray encounters a young woman he helped to deliver as a baby:

Ray meets one of the detestable children of the modern day. I delivered her baby and now she’s delivered her modern self onto the world. She was at the 7-Eleven when I was buying crab bait.

“Are you, I’d guess, a Taurus, Doctor Ray?”

“Yes. Nice to see you.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Fishing with my father and my son.”

“Oh, how macho. Just like a Taurus.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

“I’m divorced now.”

“Oh.” (56)

What begins as a “detestable” brush with modernity (“modern day”) ends with the implication of a new sexual adventure. Turned on by Ray’s “macho” behavior, the doctor’s question (“isn’t it?”) is answered with the answer to a question he never asked;

she's "divorced now," and the addition of "now" to the end of her response communicates to Ray not only her availability, but her receptiveness to his yet-unmade advances. Ray ends the exchange with an "Oh," and read as an onomatopoeia, this utterance also prefigures the potential facial expression and utterance that accompanies his future climax. Again, it is Ray's "macho" masculinity that sets this in motion, and its connection to the astrological sign of Taurus and fishing offers another grotesque contradiction. On the one hand, masculinity is shaped by fictive markers of identity (astrology), and on the other it functions as a kind of sport ("fishing") in which competition (in this case, sexual prowess) helps cement one's status as a man.

Of course, Ray isn't much of a fisherman as indicated by his response being framed as a question, but that doesn't seem to matter. The woman isn't interested in Ray because he's a Taurus *or* a fisherman, nor even because he's a doctor. Rather, it is the collection of lineal masculinities that interests this woman, the combination of three concurrent generations of Forrests that whets her appetite. Ray may be the one buying "bait," but he himself is also bait, a grotesque lure fashioned by dominant social practices and meant to lure others who seek (re)incorporation with hegemony through consumption. For this woman, Ray's body represents less a grotesque delicacy and more a bourgeois body that Bakhtin regards as "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited" (320). In the woman's eyes, Ray's is a bourgeois body precisely for its completeness, its lineage, affluence, and wholeness of masculinity (and, perhaps, for its astrological and sportsman qualities). The bourgeois body, unlike the grotesque body, has definite boundaries, a specific meaning in the world as defined by specific categories and socio-political structures; Rodney Giblett calls the bourgeois body a neo-

classical ideal, one positioned in direct opposition to the grotesque body that defies boundaries and completion (61). With their neo-classical contours, bourgeois bodies connote modern cities, nationhood, and ultimately regulation of other bodies through social practices and political domination (Giblett 62). Grotesque bodies are not immune to adopting such roles—they are ambivalent, if excessive—but their very undefinable qualities and unfinished, constantly changing contours distinguish them as deviant bodies.

But contrary to the woman's point of view, Ray's is *not* a bourgeois body, and his deviancy, often expressed through grotesque feasting reinforces his status as a grotesque body. In discussing the work of novelist Patrick McGrath, Stella Butter points out how consumption in grotesque realism symbolizes a desire to reincorporate with, and also potentially subvert, patriarchy:

If meat consumption is coded within patriarchy as an essential attribute of virile masculinity, then the grotesque feast featured in the novel not only violates the fundamental taboo of cannibalism, but it also encompasses a literal and bodily re-incorporation of those gendered elements which are excluded and repressed in the dominant model of masculine identity from the demands of patriarchy. (346)

Men in *Ray* are consumed as much for what they *are* as for what their bodies imply about the larger society around them, but as Ray himself points out, his inner truths reflect something very different than his swaggering, virile demeanor: "I am infected with every disease I ever tried to cure," Ray tells us in one of many confessional moments, "I am a vicious nightmare of illnesses" (51). In this way, the virile masculinity Ray often embodies is equally a burden, a "disease" to which Ray is beholden. And here, again, the grotesque contradiction between the world as it seems and the world as it truly exists generates an unresolved tension in the narrative. Ray's big sex engine is cast as

a “vicious nightmare of illnesses,” and the plural tense of the clause’s subject (“illnesses”) finds an analog in the plurality of masculinities he--and this study as a whole--confronts. Hegemonic white Southern masculinity offers no peace, no clear scaffold from which to build a lasting or even sensible identity. Instead, it’s a “disease,” a sex- and violence-fueled “nightmare” of vague proportions that, as we’ll see in the sections to follow, are historical in scope. Masculinity is, in other words, a state of crisis, an idea Butter comments on when she writes that the “grotesque body functions not only as a site of the return of the oppressed, but also as the site for epistemic crisis” (347).

Tim Edwards sums it up when he writes that “masculinity is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis” (14), an idea that *Ray* compounds through its examination of nineteenth century manhood experienced alongside modern masculinity. Much of what can be called the novel’s plot, a term that hardly describes its collective narrative moments, propels its characters from one crisis to the next--Charlie De Soto’s crisis with his neighbors, then his girlfriend; Ray’s crisis with desire and fidelity, and his grief over the death of his lover; Westy’s crisis over seeing Ray for what he is and finding something within that to salvage, some scrap of a recognizable, trustworthy human. On a narrative and conceptual level, much of the crisis of *Ray* is the crisis of postmodernity, summarized by Vincent Crapanzano as “the result of hegemonic failure” in which there is no “Third” to stabilize dialogical and rhetorical engagement between subjects, their social and political structures, and discourses of reality (435). It is for this reason I call grotesque realism, particularly of the sorts examined in this study, a postmodern mode of narrative mediation, for in the grotesque’s unresolved dialectic of subject and object there is no

“Third,” no lapse in the sustained tension between subjective states. To put it another way, the crisis of postmodernity is its confrontation with modernity; the scene analyzed above in which Ray encounters a “detestable” child of the “modern day” clues us in to how Ray’s crisis stems in part from a similar confrontation with modernity, a term used twice in the exchange to emphasize the “detestable” quality of the woman’s generation *and* the times in which their interaction takes place. Though *Ray* is set during the 1970s, Ray elects to define modernity more broadly as a tarnished, corrupted *present* in contrast to *the past*, something that will become apparent when I examine the Civil War flashbacks in closer detail. The novel also uses the past and present to delineate the grotesque tension between the world as we *think* it exists and the world as it *truly* exists.

From Ray’s perspective, modernity is full of such “detestable children” because they reveal to him the imperfect, fragmented, contradictory nature of reality as opposed to the idealized (and lavishly fantastical) past in which he immerses himself from time to time. Zygmunt Bauman sees the conflict between postmodernism and modernism as one of resistance to organization and tradition, a “dismantling of the ‘traditional’, inherited and received, order; in which ‘being’ means a perpetual new beginning” (10). In positing postmodernity as a kind of “perpetual new beginning,” Bauman’s definition of the postmodern resists its very definition; its state of constant becoming bears more than a passing resemblance to Bakhtin’s ideas about grotesque realism. Other scholars, such as Charles Jencks, see postmodern narratives as refutations of traditional, accepted orders of categorization, orders that fail to “encompass the pluralism that is our social and metaphysical reality” (8). Modernity in *Ray* is not simply the modern world of the novel’s setting, but a contextual frame of reference for the reality that Ray both

lives within and often struggles against; in his movement between past lives, and between fidelity and unrestrained extramarital desire, Ray grapples with the idea that ethical and social constants meant to stand the test of time—marriage, for instance—are not only violable, but permeable, as subject to contextualization through social practices as is his subjectivity. The modernity Ray dreads and rails against, what is embodied in the woman he meets outside the 7-Eleven, threatens the fantasy of the past he draws from to consolidate his masculine identity. In other words, *Ray* posits a relationship between the past and the present in which the latter works backward; his fantasy, replete with past selves that romanticize a white Southern masculinity defined by its martial (military) proficiency, is eventually overtaken, intruded upon, by the present (modernity). Modernity infects and destroys the romanticized past, and in doing so, calls into question tendencies to romanticize and mythologize Southern history and identities.

For Ray, to encounter the embodiment of the modern that he literally helped birth into the world is to acknowledge both his part in ushering in the “modern” times as well as those “detestable” qualities that are present in himself. In her, Ray confronts a reflection of what he secretly embodies, or at least a body that represents the truth of the world, one that is changing more rapidly than he can keep up. It also reminds him that it takes a “detestable” person to bring another into the world; though occasionally focused on ideas of justice and retribution (such as the murdering of Sister and Ray’s infidelities), the novel never lingers more on the notion of a karmic cycle than this moment. Ray distinguishes between himself and embodiments of modernity as a means of ordering the world, but that very ordering only heightens the awareness of deviance within and without, of the abnormality that has *always* existed within him. This is, in a

sense, postmodernity as it functions in *Ray*, a kind of intellectual stepping away from the banquet table mid-feast to assess what's on the menu (surprise, it's people!). As Bauman tells us, "We may go a step further and say that the 'order-making' now becomes indistinguishable from announcing ever new 'abnormalities', drawing ever new dividing lines, identifying and setting apart ever new 'strangers'" (11). These "strangers" provide Ray with a means of differentiating himself from the "detestable" modern rabble. At the same time, they reflect his own desires through their hunger for his body, the vessel for Ray's essence, his Southernness, his "macho" virility, his potency. To embody a faithful Southern man and husband, Ray must likewise consume them through infidelity.

The contradiction between fidelity and rampant sexual desire innate to white Southern masculinity provides the backdrop for many of Ray's sexual adventures. Late in the novel, Eileen, the wife of Ray's friend, Charlie De Soto, comes to visit Ray at his clinic. Eileen and Charlie have, by this point in the novel, separated due to Eileen's recent coming-out as a lesbian, and Ray immediately notices how this deviancy (in the heterosexist view of the novella) impacts Eileen's body: "She was pale and she had developed a dramatic deepness in her voice. It was huskier, more Northern. I think she comes from Selma, Alabama. I am not an expert on lesbianism, mind you" (102). Deviance and otherness are linked to region ("more Northern") and sexuality. Eileen is "pale" ostensibly because she is no longer wholly Southern, and even the facts of her heritage--where she comes from and in what state--are called into question ("I think"). Yet by the end of the passage, all of Ray's conjecture, everything discussed above, is also called into question by his admission of ignorance; he's "not an expert" on

sexuality, but what general physician is? Ray is clearly out of his depth (in more ways than one), a fact he feels compelled to repeat aloud to Eileen: "I said, 'First let me say that I am not an expert on lesbianism'" (102). If this repetition emphasizes Ray's discomfort, the "First" he uses as a preface alerts us that there is more to it than simple ignorance. Here, "First" is one of several points, the remainder of which Ray doesn't make, but which we can surmise by the two personal pronouns "I" and "me." What makes Ray uncomfortable isn't neither Eileen's sexuality nor his ignorance if it, but a growing awareness, brought ever closer to conscious acknowledgement, that Eileen's deviance is mirrored in himself.

In this scene, dreams help to clarify this moment of grotesque articulation in which Ray becomes ever more aware of his own deviancy. In response to Ray's statement of expertise (or lack thereof), Eileen describes a dream she recently had:

"That's okay," she says. "I was shocked myself. I had fever and the shakes. It was like a big dream where you can't help walking toward the place although it's scary. There were a lot of voices and mouths. Then I became one of the mouths. I became one of the soft naked girls, and an ecstasy ran through every part of my mind. And I was there at the place and it was familiar, like coming back to something you had as a child." (102-103)

The "fever" and "shakes" that precede the dream link the approaching psychological metamorphosis with a physical one, and unlike Ray's "bad things" that nearly crash his plane, Eileen's "scary" place promises sexual "ecstasy" through transformation. A sentence later, she becomes a mouth to consume the objects of her desire, the "soft naked girls." Margaret Miles points out that women's mouths (and speech) are often correlated with sexual desire and the vagina, a "well-established polemic" of discrimination dating back to medieval literature (99). Miles argues that to control a woman's mouth is to control her speech, and to control her speech is to control her

sexuality, to regulate her desire (99). Eileen's admission is an act of sexual and subjective agency, one in which she, and not Ray or her husband, decides who and what she desires and under what terms. Desire in *Ray* is, as I've noted, consumption, and consumption is about reincorporation. In becoming what she wants to consume, Eileen takes part in the grotesque feast of bodies, of mouths consuming other mouths, of soft naked girls consuming each other, and thus moves past the initial shock and sickness that prefaces her sexual awakening into a "familiar," comfortable zone of subjectivity. By consuming her own deviancy, she ingests and digests the idea that there is anything truly (objectively) deviant about who and what she is.

When Ray asks why she came to see him, Eileen responds by saying it's because he's a doctor. But Ray's professional opinion is laughably simplistic, and his treatment is, predictably, sex: "Let me fuck you,' I say. 'It will be good for you. Doctor's orders,' I say. 'Come on,' I say, 'you crazy lesbian bitch--ohh, uhh, uhnn, touch it!'" (103). The misogynistic and homophobic overtones of this scene are distorted by the comic phrasing and grunting, and the reliance on grunts and groans to imply the specifics of the scene read like braggadocio, the hyperbole of fictitious sexual conquest. Ray and Eileen *may* have slept together, and it's possible to also read the scene as sexual assault or rape, but the exaggerated macho swagger of the exchange leaves plenty of room to doubt that any actual sexual congress occurred. What rings undeniably true is the underlying force that energizes Ray's deep-rooted desire to achieve what Eileen has achieved: finding and recognizing a coherent sense of self. Bakhtin reminds us that the grotesque body operates under a specific logic, one that "transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the

world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and the surrounding objects" (310). Bakhtin's term "objects" is particularly relevant here, as Ray's directive for Eileen to touch him emphasizes the impersonal pronoun "it" to refer to more than simply his body. Here, "it" may also be the object of signification, a joining point between the body and the larger world, and Eileen's touch, deviant in its ability to embrace models of identity that fall outside the hegemonic norm, promises an escape from the "confines" of normalcy. By degrading the body and wallowing in the sex act, however misogynistic the phrasing, we see the male body as an object to be consumed and fondled, but for which there is no lasting satisfaction, no true transgression (such as what Eileen has achieved) beyond fleeting sexual climax. The power and masculine privilege Ray possesses, even when used in a vain and desperate attempt to assert its dominance, fails to satisfy any deeper desire to overcome its own boundaries. On its own, it builds nothing of substance, much as Ray cures nothing. Despite the "Doctor's orders," Eileen can't be cured or returned to a state of normalcy--alignment with dominant social practices--because unlike Ray there's nothing wrong with her in the first place.

Ray's treatment is directed at himself. It is Ray who is sick and dangerously so, and the narration immediately prior to Eileen's arrival at the clinic makes this clear:

Something's wrong.

Westy and I are not close in the old way. My dreams are big discouraging monsters, hellish. Had one that was a walking building, which was my high school. It was my old high school chasing me down the block.

I tell you, if not for his old records and his Shakespeare, Ray would be a casualty of the American confusion. (102)

While Eileen possesses the bravery to approach the place that looms, threatening, in her psyche, Ray falters. His high school, the institution in which adolescent maturation

approaches entry into the adult social world, becomes instead a “hellish” monster, connoting the idea that both he and the structure are already damned. Where Eileen’s dream terminates in “ecstasy,” a transformation that embraces sexual awakening and identity, Ray’s retreats into the comfortable relics of the past--his “old records and his Shakespeare,” the totems, so to speak, for his particular brand of rock n’ roller machismo and poetic sensibilities. But the real focus of Ray’s fear lies in the disconnect he feels with his wife, Westy, and the allusion to the cessation in their sexual relations. The “old way” here refers to the novel’s many enthusiastic sex scenes between Ray and Westy, at least in part, and to the unnamed object of the sentence prior, the something of “Something’s wrong.” Much as Eileen isn’t truly sick, neither is Westy, unless by sick we’re meant to understand it as “sick of Ray” and his bullshit. It is Ray who holds in his mind the “hellish” dreams full of “discouraging monsters,” Ray who feels threatened by the past (his high school) and present (Westy) circumstances. It is Ray and not the detestable children of modernity (women) who ultimately embodies a sense of “American confusion,” the feeling that something is amiss about the world, and about *who* and *what* he is.

From Contradiction to Crisis

The overt sexual qualities of Ray’s and Eileen’s dreams and interactions are one of many smaller sub-narratives of promiscuity in the novel in which desire drives bodies to consume that which represents what they wish to become. But the contradictory qualities of such dreams, and the uncertain outcome of their sexual interaction--the culmination of masculine desire in the novel--generates a counter-narrative, one that uses desire and sexual promiscuity to undermine dominant social practices of power

and embodiment. According to Fabio Poppi, personal narratives, including fictional accounts that focus on promiscuity very often “do not reflect the content of cultural narratives about sexual promiscuity:”

Here, it is possible to claim that these personal narratives work as counter-narratives. Cultural narratives (master narratives) provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure regarding a certain phenomenon . . . but the way they are used is oriented by individuals Participants have used counter-narratives of sexual promiscuity to show, for instance, their need for gender equality and a more confident attitude, and maybe to provoke (940-941)

While Poppi’s work focuses on personal narratives of promiscuity in sociological case studies, I argue that to view such narratives in literature, particularly literature in which desire, promiscuity, and sexual appetites are major thematic forces, aids in a reading that doesn’t waive the more problematic aspects (misogyny, homophobia) of the text, but prompts us to consider them from a new angle. This is especially true when the grotesque is present, for its qualities of distortion, tension, and contradiction encourage renewed scrutiny in the world around us *and* within us, at objects as well as subjects. The grotesque invites us to explore pluralistic states of subject-objecthood and to locate in such an exploration what Géza Horváth calls acts of personal experience and creation capable of generating contrary narratives of selfhood—counter-narratives of subjectivity (8). Broadly speaking, then, counter-narratives originate in narrative or thematic structures that fail to reinforce a dominant point of reference and drive subjects to consider their objectness. If the “Doctor’s orders” Ray gives to Eileen reads as a heterosexist deployment of hegemonic masculine dominance, particularly over women, they are also comically positioned, as noted above, as cures applicable to no sickness but his own.

As is evident from his “hellish” dreams and the “Something’s wrong” that precede this episode, offset as a paragraph separate from even the hellish dreams, Ray’s (and *Ray’s*) narratives of promiscuity can be seen as a cry for help, a desperate and shame-faced admission of the contradiction that a white Southern masculinity defined by its virility cannot coexist with an equally influential and proximal masculinity that emphasizes fidelity, loyalty, and family--at least, not without engendering some major “American confusion.” While there’s more to unpack regarding the role of region and myth as forces that influence the construction of masculinities, I want to focus for now on the more personal, subjective confusion from which Ray suffers. More to the point, this subjective confusion, a state in which Ray (and other men in the novel) struggles to navigate the contradictory nature of masculine identity, deepens into a personal crisis more fully and truly emblematic of white Southern masculinity. A page later, Ray helps elucidate just how deep that crisis goes when he considers poisoning himself:

And yet without a healthy sense of confusion, Ray might grow smug. It’s true, isn’t it? I might join the gruesome tribe of the smug. I think it’s better with me all messed up.

I looked at the Nembutals this morning and thought for about three minutes about going over to the other side. Westy is snoring per usual. I love to hear her snore. I love to hear her come too . . . Going over to the other side, I’m not sure I could fuck, shoes or no. So I ditched the whole idea. (103)

Despite the comic framing of the scene, Ray’s serious consideration of suicide stems from the “confusion” that results from the grotesque contradictions of desire (“fuck”) and fidelity (“Westy is snoring per usual”). The “gruesome tribe of the smug” may refer to those who avoid such self-scrutiny, but it could just as well apply to those who opt instead for the Nembutals, those who, perhaps unable to make sense of the “confusion,” go to “the other side.” That this “confusion” intersects at the crossroads of

suicide is alarming, particularly in a novel dedicated to grotesque comic excess, and highlights the crisis experienced by men (though not solely men) who find themselves unable to navigate an identity of contradictory directives.

Ray is far from alone in his state of crisis and confusion. What he experiences by confronting the contradictions innate to hegemonic masculinity are best summed up by Gerhard Hoffman as “a new American (and global) condition,” a state of crisis that resonates on the personal and public levels simultaneously. Hoffman writes:

There are no longer any binding beliefs and ideas available that transcend specific sections of knowledge . . . the American dream, set against the violence of the past and the uncertainties of the present, has to be questioned, reinterpreted, reversed and related to the void or the “underworld” of the unknown, the unknowable and mysterious in human nature and the world. (206)

Ray’s “binding beliefs” prove insufficient in guiding him to any transcendent truth. He turns, instead, to the body, to sexual desire, and here we see that his earlier emphasis on his “big sex engine” speaks to more than just a hankering to get his rocks off. It’s a way, however circuitous, of articulating the bodily expression of subjective discomfort and confusion. In other words, Ray’s “big sex engine” is simultaneously his libido and his body’s way of confronting the contradictions of Southern masculinity. In this fundamentally grotesque state, Ray’s bodily discomfort mirrors the social discomfort of postmodernity, one in which the pristine surface of the American dream (the world as we think it to be) and the “‘underworld’ of the unknown” (the world as we fear it to truly be) are likewise maintained in unresolved tension.

In an effort to achieve a sense of stability with regards to identity and his place in the larger social circles, Ray anchors himself through sex and music. This is made explicit when, at Sister’s funeral, he is asked by Westy:

"Is everything just sex and music?"
"No."
"You're awfully down."
"I need more sex and music." (58)

Ray leans on desire--sexual and aesthetic--as a conduit to express the frustrations and discomfort that result from confrontations with the grotesque reality of his own identity, but Westy sees through the bravado and notes he is "down," a pun that relates as much to his state of mind as his sexual organ. Rather than reinforce Ray's false machismo, Westy's comment works to generate a counter-narrative, one that paints Ray's reliance on "sex and music" as a ridiculous, ultimately false method of dealing with the growing awareness that his masculine identity is a mass of contradictions, a knot with no discernible end, and maybe no discernible beginning. Ray's simple "No" only hammers home the point as it comically contradicts what he claims two lines later. Not even Ray, it seems, can keep up the lies forever.

In this grotesque moment of comedy where sex operates as the fulcrum between life and death, the primacy of desire as a reason to live is established, but also mocked. That's because for as much as *Ray* revels in sexual conquest and posits bodies as feasts for restorative reincorporation to regional and national identities, the act itself is anything but restorative for Ray. On the contrary, sex for Ray is always poised as an alternative to death, and the line that divides them narrows as the novel moves toward its climax (no pun intended this time). James Goodwin defines grotesque narratives that originate in thoughts of death as noble grotesques, and argues they rely on tragic (in tragi-comic narrative schemas) themes to generate the lion's share of subjective (and narrative) discomfort (10). Noble grotesques distinguish themselves for their emphasis on the necessity of tragedy as the counter-balance to comedy, and produce an effect of

negation, a thematic (and potentially literal) sense that a character or story's narrative momentum, fueled by grotesque tension and discomfort, terminates in subjective nothingness. In the reckoning with the contradictory nature of white Southern masculinity, Ray's sense of selfhood, his very subjectivity, risks being negated. Held in tension with the comic tone of the novel, this deep-rooted fear of bodily and psychic death permeates the narrative, arising now and then as Ray contemplates suicide, or through hyper-violent confrontations with the many crazed patients Ray begrudgingly treats. Sure, Westy's earlier pun that Ray is "down" is a well-deserved jab at Ray's insatiable extra-marital sexual appetite, but it also neatly points to the ground, to the grave, to the underworld of death that sits so inescapably near her husband. Death surrounds Ray even as the comic tone of the novel holds it at bay, and in this "noble strain" of the grotesque there lies a deep and sincere consideration of the discourse of humanity, of life and death as they pertain not just to polemical aspects of the grotesque but to bodies.

Though the novel frames sex and desire as consumptive acts that help others incorporate aspects of identity into a subjective whole, Ray finds only the opposite: a need that can never be met. Ray's sexual appetite is insatiable because the hunger it is meant to abate is also insatiable. There is no resolution for the contradictory mess that is white Southern masculinity, and no matter how many notches Ray puts on his belt, no matter how guilty he feels over his constant and flagrant infidelity to Westy, it is never enough. It is this perpetual hunger, this perpetual desire in *Ray* that leads its protagonist and other male characters to deeper, more critical moments of self-examination. Late in the story, Charlie De Soto, Ray's closest friend (and, it should be noted, Eileen's

husband) arrives at Ray's residence. Ray is in a deep depression and tells us, "I see no pressing reason to get out of bed. The lights are off and it is raining and the covers are the cave I dreamed of when I was a child. I am pretending to be sick--a faker like some of my patients. I dream of monsters that cannot get me. Ha ha. The covers touch me like mother hands." (97). Ray's "bed" becomes his childhood "cave," a clear referent to the mother's womb as indicated by the "mother's hands" at the end of the passage. What Ray desires in faking his sickness is a psychological and affectual return to the womb, to childhood ("child"), and a state of protected vulnerability. Unlike the dream he described before his seduction of Eileen, these "monsters" cannot get him. The "cave" of the mother, the protective nimbus of maternal care, grants him a temporary respite that falls outside the bounds of normative, dominant masculine models of behavior. Here, Ray's infantilization of himself is strongly at odds with the swaggering, seductive doctor of means that traipses through much of the narrative, and the idea that safety can only be located in a regression to maternal custody and childhood draws attention to the ways that the adult men of the novel lack those very qualities.

Ray's fakery is a temporary reprieve. Charlie arrives, distressed over his crumbling marriage, and wants to go shoot his new bow and arrow, a prospect that interests Ray "about as much as a traffic jam" (97). But out they go to shoot gar in the swamps, only to find a surreal and desolate reflection of themselves:

We went out Highway 82 to the swamps of the Sipsey River. And there the huge, rolling, scaly, comb-toothed, vicious-snouted gar were not waiting. We were over our shoes in mud, and it was drizzling dirty rain, getting chilly, and the water was still as oil. There was one woodpecker going at it in the high branches of the dead tree. It was the only sign of life, and we'd been there two hours.

Charlie looked up at the woodpecker. Then he loaded the bow.

"Aw, Charlie," I said.

"If I don't kill something, I'm going to kill my wife," he said.

Says I, "Go ahead. You ain't going to hit it, anyway."
But he did. The arrow rose from the bow as dead-sure as a heat-seeker
and skewered the lovely redheaded thing, went on up in the air with the bird still
on it. (97-98)

The "mud" and "dirty rain" presents an exterior that mirrors Ray's and Charlie's inner emotional and subjective landscape. Much as they're "over their shoes in mud," they're equally bogged down in the navigation of masculinity, desire, and their inability to make any of it into something, *anything*, that meaningfully coheres. Like the gar they seek, the ones peppered with adjectives to emphasize their appearance and disposition, there is nothing here for them. In a place where "rain" is compared to "oil," the swamp reflects the inhospitable inner world of these men for whom the nearness of death can only be temporarily abated by infantilization, men unable to untangle who and what they are from the dominant social practices of Southern gender identity, driven at last to "kill something" or either kill themselves or their spouses.

In this moment of critical self-reflection, all the novel's emphasis on desire is called into question, and all of Ray's lies and smooth talk are peeled back to expose what it's like to walk in Ray's shoes. Desire represents the affective and psychological space Ray inhabits, the razor's edge between life and death, between killing something or fucking it or, perhaps, killing himself. Desire becomes the flip side of the coin from going over to the side on Nembutals (or at the business end of Charlie's arrow), a desperate attempt to navigate the grotesque tension between life (promiscuity) and death (fidelity) embodied by masculinity. Even as they stand there, faced with a scene that recreates the hellish underworld of their nightmares, the grim reflection of their own psyches, they are "getting chilly," approaching a death-like state that can only be warded off by the killing of the sole "lovely" wildlife present, the woodpecker. Desire,

even the desire to kill, is the only stopgap to self-obliteration, and the lone bird, the “only sign of life,” is killed to scratch another such itch. Here, writ large, is the comically terrible trajectory of masculinity as it is experienced in the novel, an identity composed of constant contradiction that results in subjective confusion so potent, so acute, that it drives men to choose: either an endless indulgence in insatiable desire, or misery so acute that the only true reprieve is death.

The violence Charlie inflicts is terrifically disproportionate to that which is needed for his target (the woodpecker), and in this moment of grotesque excess and conquest, nothing but dissatisfaction and misery follow. Distraught over his killing of the bird, Charlie swims in the river, hoping to find it, but returns with a mere feather, an object representing the ruined and fragmented object of his hate and desire. Only then can he confess what truly ails him: “‘I been having hate in me since my wife turned lesbian or narcissistic or whatever,’ Charlie says. ‘But look, I’ve killed this beautiful bird. Ray, you’ve got to do something for me’” (98). When the human object of his desire, his wife, proves inscrutable, Charlie’s frustration emerges into “whatever,” a term that perfectly captures his inability to reconcile the notion that his wife’s sexuality and identity may be far more complex than he previously imagined. As his confession continues, the “hate” he has in him is reversed when the bird is deemed “beautiful.” Recall that a paragraph earlier, Charlie felt it necessary to kill *something* instead of his wife, and the bird became Eileen’s stand-in, the surrogate for the “hate,” frustration, and rage he has felt ever since Eileen began to explore and express her sexuality. Here, hate and beauty, rage and remorse find themselves contending for expression and validity; Charlie’s request to Ray fares little better. Ray responds in three short paragraphs:

Nothing really to say except in some reaction like on the television.
Now I am looking at the bird with the arrow through it.
And all it does is make me very sleepy. (99)

Ray's response is compared to a scripted television reaction--a facsimile ("like") that approximates an approximation of human emotion and empathy. His true reaction? He feels "very sleepy," a call-back to the previous chapter in which he faked sickness to return to some sense of maternal protection. But there are no protecting mothers in the swamp, and neither he nor Charlie are children safe in caves made of blankets. They're adult men, confused and lost, and Ray has "nothing really to say" because what he's trying to communicate can't be captured in language. What Charlie has shot, then, is not simply his frustration and anger, nor the symbolic stand-in for his distant (and, to him, potentially inhuman) wife, but himself--*themselves*.

Faced with the stark images of who they really are, the grotesque otherness of the world becomes the known reality, and what Ray and Charlie are experiencing is the severe discomfort that accompanies grotesque articulation, the pivotal moment where subjective articulation between subject and object can be felt bodily and cognitively by the individual. That this articulation, particularly in the scene above, revolves around desire, death, and gender roles serves to remind us of the power of the grotesque, of its ability to "function as an effective means to heighten the awareness of the gendered classification schemes that structure the fabric of our reality and fortify the normative gender roles within patriarchal society" (Butter 337). Through articulation, the grotesque opens the potential to explore the uncomfortable and contradictory dynamics of gender and desire in *Ray*, revealing that the underlying foundations of the South's "gendered classification schemes" are nowhere near as sturdy as hegemonic social practices

might lead us to believe. Hardly unique to *Ray*, this counter-narrative of death and confusion is what Weston describes as Hannah's narrative and thematic connections to the Gothic, an uncomfortable, searching note in his works that "bespeaks a sense of being as lost in the world as in the labyrinth of a Gothic castle, but the key that Hannah's characters are searching for is to the puzzle of themselves" (20). Ray and Charlie are puzzles to themselves, a fact about which they are painfully, uncomfortably, *grotesquely* aware, and one that is inextricably connected to violence.

The Path to Violence

In the previous chapter, I explored how violence defines white Southern masculinity in Crews's *The Knockout Artist*, and I argued that its protagonist's inability to correctly (as defined by hegemonic social practices) deploy and withstand that violence led to his subjective emasculation, and eventual disavowal of dominant models of masculine identity. *Ray*, on the other hand, opts to show how violence is proximal to sexual desire in the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity, and how its errant deployment can inadvertently disrupt already fragile chains of signification between men and masculinity. While attending a high school football game, Ray recalls a pivotal moment in which violence was used by another man to forcefully eject him from a masculine social circle:

It was a rebirth for old Ray. I hadn't seen high school football since I played it at one hundred and fifteen pounds and one cold night in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, got knocked over a fence and onto a cinder track in the middle of the cheerleaders by some hulking freak who later found his way to the Chicago Bears. That was my last punt return, and I went seriously into the Fine Arts after that, where you could play with yourself and get applauded for it. (32)

In this recollection, Ray is literally "knocked" over a fence that, symbolically, represents a boundary between the masculine world of football and the feminine world of the

“cheerleaders.” The “hulking freak” who ejected him remains on the masculine side of the divide and finds success in playing pro football; he, the freak, is in fact *not* a freak in dominant classification schemas that reward him for his athleticism, for his deployment of violence. At the same time, this memory reminds Ray that there is something freakish about approved forms of masculinity. From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity (represented by the “hulking freak”) the “freak” here is actually Ray, and the fact that he lands on a “cinder track,” a literal trail of burnt material, explicitly connects a sense of degradation with his new coordinate into the effeminate “Fine Arts.” Ray may be “applauded” for focusing on sex and masturbation (“play with yourself”), but it’s worth noting that this emphasis is positioned within the effeminate world of “Fine Arts” and “cheerleaders,” and thus his “last punt return” becomes an analog for social and subjective castration.

Desire and sex, though, are only stopgaps to future violence, to potential new ejections from masculine identification. By going into Fine Arts, Ray is spared violence by men more aggressive and imposing than he, men who more closely and obviously align with dominant models of Southern masculinity. This is, in part, why *they*, and not Ray, are the “freaks,” why Ray views theirs as the deviant bodies, and possibly why the introspective Ray who narrates the rest of the novel seems so laser focused on his inner flaws. As I previously mentioned, Ray is a liar, and this attribute, common to many of Hannah’s characters, is often redirected at the world outside the body, at the various institutions, traditions, and social practices that govern traditional (hegemonic, or at the very least, dominant) behavior. Ray, like many of Hannah’s most notable characters, feels what Weston describes as a sense that “some ‘great lie’ has been perpetrated

against them. They seem to be caught in a double bind of causes and effects that, when aggravated by the specifically gender-based, culturally predicated dreams and burdens of contemporary boys and men, often leads to grotesque attempts to live a meaningful existence" (14-15). Very often, Ray implies that marriage and everything it promises is the "great lie," and the depth and complexity of his extra-marital relationship with Sister does much to substantiate this.

But for the narrative, the "great lie" is more complicated and frames Ray's shortcomings--especially his infidelity--as indicative of a deeper problem of identity. To return to an earlier example, after sleeping with Laurie Chalmers, Ray chastises himself:

Ray, listen, I said on the plane back. You don't have the spiritual resources to cheat on your wife. You feel wretched and sinful and hung over, without having had any liquor. Adventures in sex are just not in your person anymore

The idea to keep at it came on, but I beat it back with thoughts of Westy . . .

But this lousy barnacle of unfaithfulness would not leave my mind. It is enough to be married to a good woman. It is plenty.

Ray, the filthy call of random sex is a killer. It kills all you know of the benevolent order of your new life. (37)

Even when reveling in the thrill of sexual conquest, Ray's quieter, more reflective moments indicate that something else--something of considerably greater importance as indicated by the "spiritual resources"--is at stake. Ray's infidelity represents masculine conquest and his own crisis of spirit. Desire and promiscuity are compared to a "lousy barnacle," an often-parasitic life form that frames Ray's desire and its significance in the construction of masculine identity as the "killer" from within that threatens the stability of his new life with Westy. Outside of Sister, capitulation to extra-marital affairs might reinforce dominant models of identity--Westy is, after all, the "good woman" juxtaposed with the "filthy call of random sex"--but it also, in another moment of

grotesque contradiction, reveals the shortcomings of those dominant models. They are, along with the negligence displayed by men like Ray, the real barnacles, the “killer” that works in conjunction with power and privilege to keep men, whether they know it or not, in a state of subjective confusion.

This subjective confusion, the unresolved grotesque tension between desire and restraint, between fidelity and infidelity, renders masculinity an unstable gender identity, one infected by parasitic, potentially deadly urges. Directly following the passages above, the plane in which Ray is flying begins to malfunction, and Ray’s response is telling: “Then the plane is in trouble. The bad things in my head have passed through the air and gone into the engines of the DC-8. Starboard engine is gone, finished, and the plane begins rolling” (37). Lucky for the crew, Ray is an ace pilot; he takes the controls and lands the craft safely. In suggesting the confused and conflicted “things” in Ray’s head are to blame for the engine’s malfunction, Ray acknowledges his own culpability, his ability to harm others through carelessness and selfishness, the danger posed by his power and privilege that, on the small scale of the single DC-8 plane, may be mirrored in society at large. Here, the “spiritual resources” Ray lacks are apparent, and so is their worth--uncontrolled sexual desire embodies in men as a murderous impulse, and as we’ll see from later examples, this compulsion for sex and violence can become so twisted, so horrifically intertwined, that one is indistinct from the other. What’s at stake is more than a sense of gender identity, or even the ability of a white Southern man to align himself with dominant local models of hegemonic masculinities; for Ray, and likely for many more men, what’s at stake is the possibility of consolidating

an identity that doesn't terminate in near brushes with death (for themselves and the people who surround them), unchecked misogyny, and thoughts of suicide.

Ray lands the plane, but rather than feel a sense of accomplishment or masculine bravado, he's shaken to the core. He calls Westy to pick him up, then has her pull over so he can vomit (38). In this vulnerable moment, Westy becomes aware that something is eating at Ray:

"Ray, there's something else wrong. Not just liquor," Westy says.

"There's nothing wrong," I say.

"There's something you should tell me. Something's with you. Something's lying heavy on you."

"Basically, Westy, I would like, after we say goodnight to the children, that you sit on my face and let me lick your thing. Like on the honeymoon."

"Oh, boy," she says.

Westy is so happy. Her feet are moving this way and that way over the pedals.

Sweet God, there is nothing like being married to the right woman. (38-39).

Westy senses the crisis within Ray, and goes so far as to capture the dual nature of the problem in a single word: Ray is "lying" about what's wrong (though as previously noted in the scene with him and Charlie in the swamp, his inability to articulate precisely what's wrong is not unique to his character), and something is "lying" atop of him--the accumulated and contradictory social practices that coordinate the construction of his white Southern masculinity. Westy is a surprisingly complex character in *Ray*, a faithful wife, but also a successful businesswoman, an individual able to pivot effortlessly between her career, her family, and her personal responsibilities in ways Ray can't possibly match. His admiration for her, an admiration tarnished by his constant infidelity, is nonetheless warranted, and in this scene Westy acutely captures the problem with a final pun--Ray is "lying" atop more than his wife, and "lying" still about the nature of his crisis.

For Ray's part, his desire here to return to the "honeymoon" is a longing to return to more than the consummation of marital bliss. It's a desire to return to the moment in which he was, however temporarily, able to literally wed sexual desire and fidelity in a way that distinguished him as a man and husband, and it is, not surprisingly, cast as another grotesque feast in which Westy becomes that which is consumed. In such a moment of grotesque feasting, or within a fleeting return to it, Ray can attempt to navigate the contradictory and murderous impulses of desire, fidelity, and the consolidation and expression of masculine identity, particularly as contextualized in white heterosexual marriage. It allows Ray to frame Westy not as the "good" woman (as compared to the immoral Laurie Chalmers) but the "right woman," the correct and valid choice for Ray to consummate desire. Such desire, properly channeled into an appreciation and consummation with the "happy" "right woman," provides a unique sense of bliss for Ray, even if her response, "Oh, boy," can be read in two ways: an understated affirmation of anticipation, and a not-quite unconscious infantilization of her husband. In this context, Westy's response confirms what Ray struggles to understand, that despite his attempts to *act like* and *be* a man, he nonetheless remains a "boy," a child incapable of wrapping his head around the greater implications of his own identity.³

Westy isn't far off the mark. Though they don't surface as often as his sexual impulses, Ray frequently courts violence as a means of masculine expression. He tells us:

³ Bakhtin tells us that the seeking, consuming mouth present in grotesque scenes of feasting attempts to defeat death through eating it (299). In the consumption of death, life is affirmed in the maintenance of grotesque dialectic tension, but here it is Ray that does the consuming, a man desperate to sate one of many desires to stave off the violence and death that accompanies masculinity.

But I still want to fight. I still want to put it to somebody, duke out a big guy. Like the asshole who came in who had shot two of his children and broken the arm of his wife. He was an alcoholic red-neck and had a lot of Beechum chewing tobacco on him. He really smelled lousy. Before I could ask him anything, he found a razor blade and came at *me*, his doctor! Lucky that Ray still has his quickness. The bastard missed me with the razor, and I kicked him in the gonads. (43)

The above scene, delivered one paragraph after a brief tribute to Westy's sexual charisma, implies the close proximity of sexual desire and violence within the consolidation of masculine identity. The "still" in Ray's first sentence confirms that the desire for violence is an ever-present piece of the scaffold of masculinity, and particularly Southern ("red-neck") manhood. Class mediates this to a degree; the "red-neck" is little more than a stereotype, loaded down with "Beechum" and trigger happy with his gun, reckless in the extreme, inhumane to his loved ones in a way that nonetheless mirrors Ray; the "asshole" physically assaults his family, but Ray is no less careless and inconsiderate of the bonds of marriage, of the woman to whom he wants to stay "married forever," no less an "alcoholic."

What surprises Ray is what he has only dimly registered in his consideration of identity, namely that the violence embodied in this man can also be directed at *him*, at the "*me*." In this moment, Ray sees the deployment of male violence against other men, something he experienced from "hulking freaks" who feminized him into the Fine Arts, and the reader sees the true danger of constructing gendered identities around the ability to deploy such violence. White Southern (indicated by "red-neck," a term generally applied to white lower-class Southerners) masculinity is not simply capable of this--history has many more examples of worse behavior directed at women, immigrants, minorities, queer communities--but is predicated upon such acts of

violence, something Ray notes: "Certain people are this way. They kill everybody around, for one reason or another. He went to the pen, but I would like to see him tortured in a dungeon to get back the suffering he has caused" (43). In Ray's view, "suffering" can be paid back ("get back") through torture, but the phrase "certain people" is, in the context of Ray's encounter with the "red-neck," telling. These "certain people," the "they" about whom he speaks, are not solely crazed and psychotic patients just a hair slower on the draw than Ray. They are, in fact, men like Ray himself, white Southern men who struggle with the grotesque contradiction that exists in both the constructions of masculinity as derived from social practices *and* in those that originate in bodily experience. The "*me*," then, is a recognition of aspects of himself in the "asshole," the realization that Ray is, whether he's willing to fully admit it or not, markedly similar to the lunatic he disarms.

In this recognition, Ray acknowledges both the plurality of masculinities and the problems fed into and derived from their embodied constructions. But nestled within Ray's description of the "asshole" is another acknowledgement, a deep-rooted sense of the need to atone. We see this in Chapter XXXVII when Ray, alone and at home, offers a rare quiet moment of self-reflection and culpability: "It's quiet, utterly quiet, except for the air conditioner going in my room. The companionship with the air alone. I am asking forgiveness for all my sins, on my knees. I got to get my mind in a higher sphere" (85). Ray's life is filled with colorful and vibrant characters, a mostly happy marriage, children galore, but "companionship" here is found with nothing, just the "air alone." The "higher sphere" is, like the earlier acknowledgment that he lacks "spiritual resources," the explicit goal, the coordinate Ray seeks, but fails, to find and penetrate. On his knees, he

begs “forgiveness” for his “sins,” and the “all” included in the clause gives this confessional, penitent scene a sense of totality; Ray is often flippant, callous about his treatment of other people, especially women, but this scene leaves little doubt that a reckoning lies ahead, that the way in which he has conducted his life cannot go unanswered, either in the material world (“my room”) or in the hereafter, the “higher sphere” where, perhaps, judgment awaits.

Ray is not a story about forgiveness, and Ray himself is not, in the grand scheme of the novel, contrite. Yet in moments such as these, the novel complicates a narrative whose tones and themes might otherwise be read in total complicity with the most oppressive expressions of hegemonic masculinity. Much of this is due to the destabilizing presence of the grotesque, an aspect of the mode that, according to Goodwin, actively works to fulfill what Flannery O’Connor held as literature’s higher purpose, to “elevate the reader into an acute witness of essential truth, not to reduce him or her to mere victim” (175). It’s worth considering that Goodwin turns to O’Connor to contextualize another text, Hawkes’s *The Lime Twig*, a novel so suffused with grotesque carnage that it spurred Goodwin into a deeper consideration of the power and application of such horror. In a similar vein, the grotesqueries of *Ray* prompts readers to consider the makeup of its characters, the world they inhabit, and the real world that makes such (at times monstrous) representations of humanity distinct, vivid, and recognizable.

Region and Manhood

Much of the subjective confusion Ray experiences defies clear articulation in language. Instead, Ray, and the novel as a whole, finds much more success in

exploring this sense of subjective confusion through bodily experience. Ray's incorporation of an unstable and rapidly disintegrating sense of the South and Southern culture--antebellum and modern--helps illuminate the peculiar constructions of masculinity present in the text through comparisons to nineteenth century manhood. Ray accomplishes this through numerous vignettes in which Ray remembers, and possibly relives, past lives, the most prominent of which is his time as a member of a Confederate cavalry brigade in the American Civil War.

These sections, threaded throughout the narrative, serve several functions, the most important of which is as a point of contrast for Ray's contemporary experiences, a means of looking away from the confusion and complications of modern life to a time that seems, on the surface, comparatively simplistic and straightforward. This is, as Gerhard Hoffman points out, a common feature of the postmodern novel of the eighties and nineties, the times in which Hannah was most prolific, and also a core facet of the grotesque as it operates in much of the literature of those decades:

It is the concern with 'underworlds,' with deformations, with the force of history, the not-seen, the break of convention, the inexplicable and unrepresentable. Disorder and deformations in society are seen with a critical view, but satire that needs a fixed value pole for its indictment of the social deficits is transcended by the grotesque, the deformation of humans by humans, that registers the inexplicable evil of human actions . . . the grotesque has available as frame of reference only the utopian *demand* of the good and the true that reality, however, marks at. (211)

As part of that grotesque postmodern tradition, Ray is guilty of much of the above--a fixation on an underworld that threatens to swallow the novel's characters, whether from a blown plane engine, stray thoughts of suicide, or situations far worse. But in the context of Ray's connection to the past and past selves, the narrative's Civil War scenes

emphasize history as both a force that exerts itself on the present and as a mythic underworld where identity, seeking consolidation, finds instead disintegration.

The mythic South of Ray's historical fantasies serve as the novel's underworld, and the grotesque violence and carnage that accompanies it in the narrative further destabilizes it as a site of legitimate (or lasting) regional gender identity--or, for that matter, any identity. In *Seeking the Region in American Literature and Culture*, Robert Jackson considers the relationship between literary discourses and region, and notes that narratives about the Civil War are, for the South, "formative regional events in modern America, particularly for the South, and their reverberations continue to be felt *nationally* as well" (20). Jackson describes the connection between art and the dominant regional culture (social practices) around it; just as the region influences art, so too does art influence region, particularly as bodies of literature age, influence and give way to new bodies of literature, and the process continues. Looked at in the macro scale, the literature of yesteryear represents more than dated representations of who and what we were, what we thought, and how we behaved; rather, it represents a consolidated cultural perspective that continues to function in the bodies of the here and now. The denizens of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha may be dated and anachronistic to a modern readership, but they nonetheless represent larger cultural attitudes (and their overarching social practices), that continue to resonate as authentic. In a manner curiously similar to body-reflexive theory as it conceptualizes the relationship between bodies and social practices, region operates upon bodies even as it is operated upon by those same bodies, and it does this *through* and *within* history, and often *in spite of it*. James Potts aptly describes Hannah's male characters as subjects caught between

history and identity, beleaguered by the tattered “warrior cult” of masculinity that relies on sex, violence, and an “omnipresent burden of southern history and myth” (72-73). For Confederate soldiers, and men inspired by Confederate symbolism and ideology, this was doubly important; Colt Allgood emphasizes the image of the Southern Cavalier in codifying Southern masculinity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and he argues that a combination of chivalric violence and religious piety was crucial for its iconic potency (30). Of course, Ray isn’t very religious, and his few moments of spiritual reflection are hardly pious. Even when Ray of the past attempts to align his identity with the romanticized Confederate ideals, there’s more than a little disjunction.

Before I analyze the novel’s Civil War scenes to determine how they complicate the book’s construction of masculinity, I want to expand and clarify this notion of subjective confusion, and one way to do so is to reframe it in an existing conversation. The idea that masculinity, generally, is experiencing a crisis of sorts is hardly new, and while I discussed it in the Introduction to this study, I want to emphasize that what is under discussion is much more than the dismantling of harmful hegemonic social practices. Ultimately, what’s at stake is power, and more specifically the power to legitimize or destroy social practices. Edwards argues that this is often perceived as two distinct crises:

The first I call the crisis from without . . . A specific concern here is the perception that men have lost, or are losing, power and privilege relative to their prior status in these institutions. The second I call the crisis from within. This is far less easily documented as it centers precisely on a perceived shift in men’s *experiences* of their position as men, their maleness, and what it means. Most importantly, this often refers to a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness or uncertainty. The continuity concerning the importance of *power* here highlights not only its significance for masculinity *per se*, but rather the sense that this is a key factor that informs the entire masculinity in crisis thesis. (6-7)

When considered alongside Jackson's and Potts's comments above, Edwards's emphasis on power as the fulcrum ("key factor") in the discussion of masculinity in crisis acquires a sense of historical and regional significance. The ways in which masculinity is configured *from* a position of power depend on the ways it is initially configured in a specific place and time, and the way it can be deployed by dominant groups to direct social practices is equally subject to the Kairos of the configuration.

Edwards traces developments in labor, criminal justice, and education from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century as key factors which collectively worked to redefine men--and to redefine their access to, ability to consolidate and deploy, and concept of power. What began as shifting composite of manhoods became, with the rise of industrial mechanization and increasing urbanization, a (more or less) masculine identity consolidated along lines of race and class, and altered here and there according to the social practices of a given region; masculinity as a twentieth century construction of gender was, primarily, aligned with white middle class dominance, but it is in Southern masculinity--and this is what *Ray* is so adept at showing us--that the relationship between masculinity and myth is so pronounced. Rather than offer a historically accurate depiction of manhood and the South, Ray's ping-ponging through the centuries, from the Civil War-era South to the South of the 1970s, lampoons manhood and its metamorphosis into masculinity, and works to disrupt its mythic enshrinement as a historically stable identity. Despite its brazenly sexist swagger, the male-centric narrative viewpoint of *Ray* never succeeds at offering up a version of masculinity, past or the present, that isn't fundamentally broken, unsound, and on the

verge of coming apart--and it goes a step further, suggesting that masculinity and manhood have *a/ways* been this way.

Unlike the various violent psychotics the Ray of the present deals with, the Ray of the past takes no joy in the bloodshed to come. Even among defeated Federal troops, there is close-knit fraternity, exemplified when a triumphant past-Ray greets a Union soldier with, "Hello, friend" (40). Despite this, the Ray of the past confronts markers of masculine identity dependent on warfare and bloodshed, such that "Stuart went out in the forest and wept" (41). As for Ray, he concludes thus: "Then all of us slept. Too many dead. Let us hie to Virginia, let us flee. I fell asleep with the banjo music in my head and I dreamed of two whores sucking me" (41). Directly following this, a chapter consisting of two sentences brings us back to the present: "I live in so many centuries. Everybody is still alive" (41). In a moment of grotesque transformation, the very opposite of what Eileen achieved in her dreams, the noisome carnage that drives Stewart into the woods becomes "banjo music" in Ray's head, and the bloodshed of the battlefield becomes "two whores sucking." If at times Ray seems willing to glorify Lost Cause mythology, he's equally willing to undercut that sentiment through absurdity. The blood-soaked battlefield becomes the bedroom, and the coordinate of armed conflict is revealed as the focal point of Ray's distress: sex and death share the same bed. If this realization drives Stewart into the woods weeping, its effect on Ray is much more pronounced: he sleeps, an act mimetic of death, and in his dreams he dies again, a feast for nameless, faceless "whores." Thus consumed, Ray of the past dies, and becomes (in the above-mentioned next chapter) Ray of the present, and it is this Ray's reaction that is so telling. He lies: he doesn't actually live in the past, much less a

cartoonish mythic past of the sort offered in his reveries, and not everyone is alive. The manhood of that mythic past dies and awakens as masculinity, but it isn't any more real or true.

The grotesque scenes of death that populate the past and present of the novel, scenes in which gruesome, inescapable bloodshed is paired with carnival celebration and intimate human empathy highlight the South's dependence on such violence as part of regional narrative of masculine identity. What's more, that same violence is cast as a celebratory rite of passage, an event which marks a cultural and regional transition into manhood. The willingness of Southern soldiers to die en masse for God, country, and home is romanticized by Ray, but not necessarily by *Ray*, and certainly not by history. Contrary to many popular depictions, armies of the era, including that of the Confederacy, were extremely varied and complex in their composition. James Broomall points out that Civil War army camps, including those of the Confederacy, contained many different types of manhood, all of which were, in a sense, encouraged to prioritize the "filial piety--the so-called band of brothers" projected by white elites "that underpinned a prominent public discourse, integral to the South's hegemonic culture" (275-276). Historically, Broomall reminds us, "neither secession nor the Confederate cause received wholesale support" (276), and consolidation behind the cause, even for soldiers in the South, was hardly harmonious, frequently featuring clashes between classes and, unsurprisingly, those who felt peculiar loyalties to their home states in the confined spaces of army camps (276-277). The result, Broomall tells us, was often fractious, and sometimes violent: "Military service thrust together poor whites, yeoman farmers, and wealthy planters. The potent mixture could sometimes bubble over,

exposing antebellum social cleavages . . . The same ties that fostered intimacy and a sense of comradeship also promoted social divisions in camps” (295). Ray demarcates place, the South, by the use of violence as a way to consolidate manhood, and conveniently glosses over how violence generated by disparate social tensions *within* the South stokes the fires of intra-Southern conflict. When examined historically, the presence of a white Southern hegemony, much like the presence of a dominant masculine identity, is not in question, but the unity and stability of those constructions and expressions are called into question, and this is exacerbated by the relationship between desire and death as markers of masculinity.

Ray’s attempts to gloss over any differences among his fellow troops and present a unified Southern army willing to die for a unified Southern cause is, at best, pure fantasy. This shouldn’t come as a surprise--remember, Ray’s willingness to indulge in fantasy and outright lies is well documented--but it does allow us to see the ways in which his identification with antebellum Southern manhood is based on myth, not historical truth. In “Neo-Confederates in the Basement,” Robert Prince discusses how antebellum Southern manhood defined itself, and how that definition relied so heavily on a connection between rebellious independence and gender:

If manliness--at least from the point of view of males--may be defined as the ability to set one’s own course, to exercise independent control over one’s destiny and, as such, to reject submissiveness to outside dictates, then emasculation could be defined as the loss of this sense of self-sovereignty, accompanied by resentment over the imposition from outside of norms and rules that do not adhere to or, indeed, discredit and undermine what one considers a good and proper way of living The South has been chasing after a durable identity for the past century and a half or more--at least since the “late, great unpleasantness.” Every time the South thinks it has a tight hold on its identity, along comes another “New South” to knock it off balance and set it grappling for a tighter grip on something more stable and everlasting. (147)

If fantasies of Confederate bloodshed give Ray some stable sense of identity, both regional and gendered, they merely offer to him that which remains insubstantial, unstable, and elusive in the present. In doing so, they reveal to him the performative nature of identity, and more specifically white Southern masculinity. In this way, and strangely, *Ray* recalls Judith Butler's idea that gender identities are merely performative of themselves, "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence . . . gender proves to be performative--that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (34). In much the same way that gender may be seen as a performative construct based on the social practices that shape it, I argue that the successive iterations of the South as a place in which identities are generated, successfully or not, are precisely that--iterative identities, constantly in revision, and more importantly, constantly subject to the imposition of others.

If *Ray* stopped there, at the instability and confusion wrought by a region's constant iteration, it would be sufficient to critique contemporary white Southern masculinity and its various embodiments. But *Ray* goes a step further and posits that the instability at the root of the narrative's subjective confusion lies in the past as much as the present, and that antebellum manhood was far from as stable as Ray wishes. Near the end of the novel, the flashbacks become disjointed and strangely lacking in the specific details present in earlier chapters. Chapter L, for example, placed a mere 17 pages from the end of the book, offers a view of the past that abandons any semblance of historical accuracy:

Your hat's rotting off. It's hot. You're not sure about your horse. Or the cause. All you know is that you are here--through the clover, through the low-hanging branch, through the grapeshot.
All of it missed you.

Your saber is up, and there goes your head, Christian. (96)

Though “the cause” remains a clear reference to the Confederacy and the Lost Cause of the South it is obscured in vagueness (“not sure about”) which includes “your horse,” the very thing which delineates a cavalryman from his infantry. This de-emphasis on individual military roles, much less the war and Southern independence, is broken off into its own sentence fragment, a clause as incomplete as its subject, the “cause”; equally fragmented is Ray, the nominal subject, now addressed in the second person via the impersonal and gender-less pronoun “Your.” From where does this Ray speak? Where is this field of “clover,” this “here” that highlights the indeterminacy of place, gender, and power? Who shoots who, and which side is firing off the “grapeshot”? In this comical indeterminacy of place and person, the narrative asks us to consider both as less substantive in the definition of identity. At the same time, the lethality of it all, indicated by “there goes your head,” reinforces the idea that masculinity is and has always been an unstable (if dominant and powerful) state of crisis, a dangerous embodiment of disharmony and contradictory impulses.

In questioning the links between region and gender, *Ray* undermines the political and social structures necessary for their mutual consolidation. It also asks us to consider more carefully the relationship between such social structures and other fundamental aspects of identity, such as race and class, and their interactions with nation. Victor Seidler argues that the discourse of civilization was used in tandem with discourses of masculinity in colonialism: “The relationship [between colonized and colonizer] was often conceived in familial and patriarchal terms, which positioned colonised others as children who were to be grateful for the guidance and mastery of

the coloniser . . . It was a particular colonial masculinity that was to carry the responsibility of ‘the white man’s burden’” (15). Seidler emphasizes the role of masculinity and race in dominant discourses of power, particularly colonialism, and while his point looks to the larger, macro-scale applications of dominant power structures on people and nations, I argue a similar relationship exists between gender and region. The very same “white man’s burden” was a major component of distinguishing a specific class of Southerner--white, land-owning elites--and though it was prevalent throughout the country, it played a vital role in distinguishing the South as the South, as a place where the white *man* was tasked with the upkeep of such through the deployment of violence, a cornerstone of what would eventually become white *American* masculinity, no longer consigned (if it ever truly was) solely to the South. In fact, as Jeremy Wells points out, part of the myth of Southern exceptionalism has been an equally prevalent myth of regional otherness, a narrative that ignores “how common and indeed influential were a set of representations that circulated a century ago and depicted the southern plantation as the United States’ true source, it’s touchstone” (180). The warped and cartoonish proportions of Ray’s historical fantasies reminds us how the South was once touted to be America’s “touchstone,” the true generative point for social practices that shaped nearly every aspect of American cultural life. Later depictions of the South as the regional other to the rest of the country were ideologically defensive, attempts to draw up the wagons behind myths of Southern exceptionalism that had fallen out of national favor (if not out of practice).

Ray’s forays into the past maintain the novel’s grotesque stasis between life and death, between subjective confusion and the deep-rooted desire to consolidate a

masculine identity. He's held in what Claire Kahane identifies as the primary psychological impetus of the grotesque, "the sense of disjunction produced between the oscillation between the familiar and the unfamiliar frame of reference, between the comic and the fearful response" (115). According to Kahane, this oscillation occurs between the continuums of the grotesque, the two poles held in tension upon which the mode depends, and upon which our ability to perceive it as such likewise depends (115). This movement, what I call grotesque articulation, represents a developing subjective awareness of this tension *as well as* the movement, the oscillation that ushers in a new subjective configuration of the self. Grotesque articulation extends beyond the subjective or psychological configuration of the individual and into the larger cultural battleground of social practices, social orders, and collective bodies. The grotesque, and particularly the comic grotesque that pervades *Ray*, actively works to draw attention to the way individuals are configured in and by a larger social object--a region, a culture, and so forth; and the grotesque also draws attention to the ways individuals, bodies, in turn shape those social objects. William Nelson defines this dynamic in the comic grotesque as one suggestive of "both affirmation of the primacy of the individual and the acceptance of multiple modes of being, the corollary of individualism . . . The terror of this universe and the hypocrisy or falsification of conventional views of it require the comic grotesque mode to accommodate and to humanize chaos" (39). The chaos that *Ray* humanizes is the growing awareness, made all the more poignant through the destabilization of regional identity, that masculinity and manhood as Ray understands them are and have always been broken concepts,

grotesque contradictions that succeed at little more than driving him to subjective confusion and other men to wanton, barbaric violence.

The final flashback shatters the idea of the South as a cohesive whole, much less a stable site for the generation of identity. Ray begins it with a dream-like entreaty: “Let us meet again, we with our gray and forward hats on a million horses. Pushing the attack toward Washington D.C. Our loves have evaporated. We run counter to them. Looking at the vista, there are cavalymen of every race and creed” (108). Much as Ray’s sense of masculine self has “evaporated, so too has the definite quality of the cause, and the past blurs into an impossible egalitarian fantasy comprised of “every race and creed” united in an attack on Washington. To situate this image historically, I turn to John Egerton’s 1974 book *The Americanization of Dixie*, a book that explores how cross-contamination between the South and the policies and social practices of the rest of the country are leading toward something else:

[T]he Americanization of Dixie and the Southernization of America are homogenizing process that are full of contradiction and ambiguity and paradox, but taken as a whole, they say more about fear and failure and estrangement in American society than they do about hope and achievement and reconciliation. The South and the nation are not exchanging strengths as much as they are exchanging sins; more often than not, they are sharing and spreading the worst in each other, while the best languishes and withers. (xx)

There is in Egerton’s writing an underlying anxiety about precisely *what* the South is, whether its makeup is more generally American than Southern, and whether that influence is ignoring vital, worthwhile facets of regional Southern culture. Later scholars, such as Leigh Ann Duck, frame this anxiety as a temporal or cultural construction by which American exceptionalism relies on Southern aberrance (212). Ray captures this anxiety, specifically the fear that whatever makes Ray, well, Ray is alien and

unrecognizable, and an embodiment whose material substance is composed of foreign, alien particulate. *Ray* is less concerned than Egerton about puzzling out the Southern from the American; instead, the novel concerns itself with separating the modern from the past, a task that proves, as the convoluted and fantastical flashback above shows, impossible. Nonetheless, Egerton's and Ray's anxieties help to situate white Southern masculinity in the '70s and '80s as a prolonged moment of uncomfortable (dare I say, grotesque) reflection: What does it mean to be Southern, much less a Southern man in a world where "the South," according to Egerton, "is just about over as a separate and distinct place" (xxi)?

The South with which Ray and Egerton struggle to make sense of is, historically, a South in the throes of major change--culturally, socially, politically. In his later work, *Shades of Gray* (1991), Egerton notes that this transitional period in national history is, for the South, "miraculous" in the scope and breadth, the most surprising of which was the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, "a descendant of slaveholding white planters . . . in part of the strength of his firm commitment to racial equality and the subsequent support he received from an overwhelming majority of black voters" (250). Four years later, of course, Carter would lose reelection to Reagan, and American politics would swing hard to the right. From a socio-political perspective, white Southern identity entered a period of extended volatility in which no totalizing framework for identity could easily (or without complication and obstruction) be patched together. *Ray* is keenly aware of this, particularly in its flashbacks to a fantastical past in which the Civil War and all its Lost Cause trappings are reduced to a carnivalesque orgy of violence, humor, and objectification. The men that occupy Ray's historical fantasies, including Ray

himself, become symbolic of white Southern masculinity as it brushes against earlier Southern manhood, and the result is antithetical to both (contemporary) hegemonic masculinity and Lost Cause mythology. In the closing moments of Ray's final historical flashback, Ray surveys the fantastical and ridiculous carnage that surrounds him and exclaims: "Eventually every man's a sword" (108). Read as a homoerotic pun, "sword" conflates violence with sexual stimulation, weapons with engorged genitals, rigid and dangerous, and held in the hands of another man. Read literally, the line conflates men with sharp objects, weapons capable of piercing, cutting, slashing--and little else. They're tools, objects to be wielded by someone else, dulled over time, and eventually discarded. But the opening word, "eventually," suggests a different, though no less viable interpretation, one in which men's bodies and psyches are objectified within and for the benefit of hegemonic power structures, in which "every man's" stands for the individual *and* the collective purpose of masculinity. If Ray is right and every man is a sword, it goes without saying that the end of martial (or sexual if read as a pun) engagement signals the end of men's usefulness.

In this light, the comment, and Ray's strange narration disconnected from any semblance of historical reality, point out what Christopher Stowe calls "the collision point between two superficially incompatible forms of manhood" (Stowe 373). In pointing out that every man is, eventually, a weapon, Ray nudges us closer to thinking of masculinity as the crisis in and through history that I've described, a history of weapon-making in men's bodies. Historically, Stowe notes, this was once far more literal, as "the ultimate measure for manhood among soldiers was the test of combat . . . manly battlefield performance was determinant in both proving a soldier's individual sense of masculinity

and shaping how he would be perceived by this in his circle--*whether in camp or at home*" (377, emphasis mine). Whether privately or communally, manhood and masculinity are social constructions of gender, and the "battlefield performance" that acts as the code by which a man's manliness might be judged serves as the final arbiter of his worthiness. It's no wonder Ray does everything he can to deflect this awful truth, a facet of Hannah's work that Weston aptly describes as a "battle:" "In Hannah's fiction, the individual continues to do battle with the code by both aspiring to and struggling against its mythic, heroic ideal; conflicts between the exigencies of that public ideal and those of the private self are at the heart of the psychic ruptures in his characters" (47). This psychic rupture, what I identify in *Ray* as subjective confusion, is in fact the result of grotesque contradiction, and grotesque articulation into an awareness about the purpose of one's body and gender identity in and through time--and to what purpose.

Of course, the historical weaponization of male bodies to enforce patriarchal violence as a dominant social practice of control and oppression isn't a new idea, even if it's taken Ray a while to get there. Orville Burton and Ian Binnington claim that Southern (and national) identity depends in large part upon physical or psychic proximity to martial ideals and history:

The viability of Confederate nationalism, therefore, depended critically on the Confederate States of America's ability to convince southerners that it embodied and protected their values . . . In this context preexisting loyalties, principally those of local community, began to expand within the lived experiences of war, to encompass more than they had before, ultimately expanding so far as to embrace the idea of nation itself. (129)

Objectified and weaponized, the white male body of the South, perceived by Ray as a "sword," helps to chart this "idea of nation" publicly and privately through acts of *collusion* between region, nation, and hegemony. It does this by cutting people to

ribbons, literally and figuratively, as the disjointed mind of Ray shows us, but it was no less deadly in the decades when Hannah wrote and published *Ray*, the 1970s and 80s during which men's bodies were fed into the war in Vietnam, into the rise of social and political conservatism following the election of Reagan, and into the myths of macho violence enshrined by (and sometimes criticized by) popular media. In the manner of all grotesque media, Hannah's novel offers no apologies for its ambiguity; it's equally comfortable reveling in chaotic, misogynistic comedy as it is wielding that same comedy in service to puncturing men's self-images. There is nothing sacred in Hannah's texts because there is nothing higher than the body, nothing loftier than the wild desires of the flesh. In the grotesque contradictions of Hannah's text, nothing is inviolable, and every point of connection between region, body, and gender comes undone.

As a postmodern grotesque, *Ray* rejects the idea that a coherent sense of the here and now, much less the past, offers any clear guidepost to how bodies and subjectivities should align, even if it goes to great lengths to examine and critique how they are constructed in the first place. Scott Romine views such narratives—those that accept, rather than attempt to refute the postmodern fragmentation of self and subjecthood—as unwilling to “weld a discontinuous reality into a coherent whole, either spatially (as in Joseph Frank’s classic account of modernism) or temporally (as a sequence tending toward the condition of a grand narrative) but as a more contingent register of negotiating and reproducing reality’s seams as they are confronted in time and space—more specifically, in the received time-space fusion called “the South”” (*The Real South* 23). Hannah's South is what Romine describes as the ongoing process of “negotiating and reproducing” a reality based on lived experience. *Ray* offers what

Wolfgang Kayser calls a “cold grotesque,” a narrative in which the unresolved tensions are discernible and perceived by bodies, but to which the appropriate reaction(s) (beyond discomfort) are hard to pinpoint (148-149). Kayser wasn’t writing with the postmodern grotesque in mind, but his idea of the grotesque is nonetheless applicable here; the postmodern grotesque, like other grotesques, makes apparent the dialectical poles of incompatibles and their conditions, but as we’ve seen from Ray (and as is also true for most of Hannah’s work), the appropriate responses are hard to pin down. The postmodern grotesque begs the question: Are there in fact appropriate responses?

Few scenes beg this question more than the last chapter of the novella, one that ends on a jubilant upswing: “Hoo! Ray! Fucking Ray! Ray in the fourth decade! Ray, yes, Ray! Doctor Ray is okay!” (113). But even here, the disjointed reality with which Ray constantly grapples is apparent in the break between the celebratory “Hoo” and “Ray” that echoes the opening question of the novel (“Say what? You say you want to know who I am?” [3]). And a page earlier, at the onset of the chapter, the other pole of this grotesque is apparent: “Sounded like something. It was in cold weather. From my heart I follow the ghost voice. It is leading me and leading and leading me” (112). Led by a “ghost voice,” potentially the Ray from the beginning of the novel, Ray is again drawn toward death, the “something” that exists solely in the “cold weather” of another time, another place, another Ray. *Ray* may be understood as what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, a kind of paradoxical fiction that is simultaneously metafictional and historical, and in particular, the parodic type that utilizes Bakhtinian polyphony and heteroglossia to emphasize the “multiple voicings of a text” (6). And indeed, there are multiple voicings--Ray of the present, Ray of the past, a few times

when Charlie de Soto seems to take over the narrative, just to name a few. Ray *tries* to come to terms with history as the origin of identity but fails to do anything other than produce greater amounts of discomfort and unease. History is, as Hobson reminds us, both Ray's obsession and a major source for his confusion, but the history over which Ray trawls for clues of how to manage and understand the present offers little in the way of guidance (37).

Ray's disregard for traditional historicity only emphasizes the point that the relationship of past to present is all too often one of reification. Very often, history is objectified in order to engage with a sense of the present as a definite, specific thing. Fredric Jameson pinpoints this in postmodernity as "neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future . . . what is at stake is essentially a process of reification whereby we draw back from our immersion in the here and now (not yet identified as a 'present') and grasp it as a kind of thing" (284). By showing the past objectified in the present as a tangled, distorted mess, Ray reveals this process of reification as a process, one in which history and region are woven together into (often mythic) narratives of identity (often dependent on gender, race, and class). The confused and commingled past and present of Ray offers a flagrantly fictive historicity of the South and its manhood, one that never materially existed outside Lost Cause narratives and antebellum romance, one that helped to construct the historical crisis that *is* white Southern masculinity in the present day. By doing this, the narrative disrupts this process of reification for past and present alike, and it presents a sense of history corrupted with an overlay of narratives so confused and distorted they make Ray look coherent. It lays bare what Romine calls nostalgic "reality homesickness" for mythic

narratives of the South, a characteristic present in much of Hannah's fiction (*The Real South* 199). Romine warns that this homesickness is often mistaken "for the real in cultural pathology . . . The deeply paradoxical nature of this relation produces a series of utopian gestures, attempts to wed desire and reality that degenerate into patterns of decay, degradation, and brutal abjection" (193). This realization of the world via degradation and decay is, I argue, a grotesque pronouncement of the world, a dawning awareness of the reality that has always existed but which for Ray and the other men in the narrative have desperately sought to circumvent through history, through fantasy, through mythic remembrance of a time and place that was never truly a time or a place.

The grotesque Southern masculinity that swaggers through *Ray* is an embodiment of this grotesque contradiction, and buried deep in there is the idea that desire and violence are dual aspects of the same thing, a larger scaffold of social practices that determine who men are and how they should behave. Even Hannah seemed to think so. In an interview with Sinda Gregory, the following exchange took place:

Sinda Gregory: Tom Robbins has said something very interesting about the South (he grew up in North Carolina). He thought that Southern men were raised with a certain paradoxical attitude about violence--that although civilized "courtly" behavior is encouraged, violence is also encouraged or accepted because it is seen as being manly.

BH: He's right. (*Conversations*, 70)

Who Pays and Who Collects

Ray is a novel about men, their struggles and doubts, their fragile identities, and their often-fractious interactions with hegemonic constructions of white Southern masculinity. It's also about them enjoying their power and privilege, and sometimes recoiling in horror from its deployment in violence. Indeed, as Thomas Bjerre notes, this

is part of how Hannah's male characters deal with what masculinity means on a moral, social level: "The clash between traditional heroic behavior and a search for something more meaningful takes place in most of Hannah's fiction. His male characters are caught in traditional masculine codes, especially what sociologists have called 'hegemonic masculinity'" (47). But for all that Ray has to say on the subject of men and their masculinities, it is not silent on the subject of women and how they often suffer due to masculine dominance. *Ray's* sexism and misogyny are rarely hidden, and the violence men inflict upon women is staggering. In one scene, Ray encounters a crazed emergency room patient who claims to have broken his wife's arm, savagely beaten his children, and who harbors absolutely no remorse for doing so (43). Later, an "old mule" of a man relishes telling Ray about the ways he beats his wife and will continue to beat her--until, that is, Ray flips the table and pulls the plug on the man, killing him (70-71). Staged as grotesque bits of comedy in which horrific violence against women is held in tension with vengeful retribution, these scenes, and others like them, nonetheless reinforce the world of *Ray* as one of tortured, twisted caricatures of real people, beings whose very existence, fictional they may be, can't help but draw attention to what Janice Neuleib calls "the hidden truth" of the comic grotesque: that its distorted worlds and figures are not comprehensive, not fully formed (27). What the comic grotesque presents in its tableau of distortion, disjunction, and contradiction is only *part* of the world as it truly exists. Ray's own misogyny, and the violence other men inflict upon women isn't meant to be shrugged off or laughed away, but its scale and ferociousness are meant to draw out a "hidden truth" of masculinity--namely that the desire to use violence to consolidate masculinity is not directed at the world at large, or even

necessarily at other men. It is directed at what is *not* masculine, what represents the opposite of everything the body-reflexive relationship between men's bodies and social practices construe about *who* and *what* men are: women, femininity, and potentially female masculinity.

Ray--and for that matter, *Ray*--know this, though the novel seems loathe to broach the subject head-on until Sister, Ray's long-time lover, is killed. When Ray learns of her murder, his somber, heartfelt response indicates true grief: "Sit on that, Ray. Your left arm is gone" (52). Ray's grief is so severe that it can't be articulated. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that some vital, innate part of himself, his "arm," is "gone," removed, inoperable. And when he is called to testify at the murderer's trial, Ray's appraisal of the man, the preacher Maynard Castro, is scathing: "In their secret hearts, such perversities as Maynard know there are things they can never have, things they have wanted with all their hearts. So they kill them" (54). The "secret" is, of course, that men such as Maynard are "perversities," monsters pulled between contradictory constructions of masculinity, but who nonetheless must be held accountable for their actions--men who destroy that which they cannot have--and sometimes that which they *can* have. The "secret," then, is that Maynard is neither remarkable in his monstrous composition, nor representative of one man, but a stand-in for *all* (as indicated by the plural "perversities") men. Maynard reflects not some errant urge given release, but the murderous impulses that arise in men when their desires--the very desires they believe cannot be withheld from them--are not fulfilled. Rather than absolve men of responsibility for their actions or relieve them of culpability for their systemic dominance and abuse of women, *Ray* reveals how violence forms but one part of an ongoing (and

terrifying) narrative about the relationships between men, masculinities, and women. Hoffman describes this revelatory aspect of grotesque violence as one that aids in our understanding of the contemporary world: “The world of violence alone has power to respond against a world of the unknowable and the void in which the old human stories are acted out again and again, destined to doom, but indefatigably repeated in inexplicable cruelty and kindness and a sense of mystery . . . the necessity to reveal the truth of reality” (239). The “truth of reality” winds up being uglier than Ray is willing to confront, at least until he’s called to look upon Maynard Castro and see what he himself could become.

What Ray seeks, then, is what many of Hannah’s characters so desperately seek--redemption, some semblance of even footing upon which to begin the process of reincorporation, of transformation into something better, that Laurie Chalmers and Eileen were able to achieve. Kenneth Millard puts it another way when he writes that “Hannah’s stories often seek to redeem, through art, characters who in life seemed worthless” (17). Instead of turning from the worst aspects of men and masculinities, *Ray* puts them on full display, front and center, and encourages a discourse about the ways hegemonic masculinities damage men and women alike--and how they drive some men to do even greater damage to those less privileged in their social orders. In this way, the novella alludes to what Hüseyin Altindis sees as a distinct possibility, that civilization, whether segmented by region (the South) or gender (men and maleness) is but a historical continuation of violence, a material account of bodies harming other bodies, of one gender dominating through any (and all) means necessary (100).

Viewed this way, masculinity in *Ray* is shown to be a historical crisis of contradictory social practices and their violent, disastrous consequences. And while I would be hard pressed to call *Ray* a radical or subversive novel in terms of its approach to hegemonic power structures, I do argue that it works to dispel the simpler, tidier ideas about white Southern masculinity. With regards to hegemonic masculinities and their relationship to power, Emmanuel Reynaud writes that “[m]an imagines his fulfillment not really in the pleasure he could experience, but rather in the obstacles he overcomes; sometimes he even goes as far as to create difficulties in order to assert himself” (145). *Ray*’s exploration of subjective confusion results from Ray’s attempts at overcoming the bodily and social obstacles that he cannot, ever, overcome without failing to be what he needs to be in order to succeed; contradictions aren’t simply part of white Southern masculinity, but something hard-coded into social practices. Ray’s is a grotesque body, the sort that, according to Patricia Yaeger, actively works to “reveal the delirium of the familiar. By re-creating a space of disorientation, the grotesque body enters southern texts with the iconic power to dazzle the reader’s senses and open her eyes to the ‘normality of the abnormal’” (237). Ray’s grotesque body is, in effect, the abnormal rendered normal by its familiarity, but as his subjective confusion grows, and as the reader sees masculinity’s brutal effects on the bodies and minds of others, the uncomfortable notion begins to creep in at the edges that what we’re witnessing, the spectacle of who pays and who collects, is far more real than the world we *thought* we inhabited.

Chapter 3. Grotesque Estrangement and the Failure of Male Discourse in Padgett Powell's *A Woman Named Drown*

For Padgett Powell, language, and more specifically writing, often originates in a desire to restructure one's place in the world, to redefine *what* one is in relation to everything else. In a 1999 interview with Rebecca Boyd, Powell responds to a question about what spurred him to write, and whether it had anything to do with being a precocious child, with the following:

I was precocious? You've got goods on me I don't? All warped adults are likely to advance the notion that they have always been 'different,' and that their only normality is abnormality, their only home not home, etc., rather as all drunks insist they are worse at it than their fellow drunks. I might have been as a child lonely, and I sought its remedy--attention--by learning to write, which might appear precocious, I suppose, but was not. It was a field with an open niche. The football field was full of boys getting attention, as was the rock stage. (105)

The desire for attention and recognition implied by the "football field" and "rock stage," two traditional arenas of masculine validation, may have driven Powell to write, and it also says quite a lot about how men purpose language into the acquisition of attention and accolades meant to reinforce their masculinity. Writing and language provided access to masculine validation for Powell, and while this analysis is largely unconcerned with the author's biography, the connection he draws between language, attention, and validation is of central import in this chapter.

Like Crews and Hannah, Powell's work often revolves around male characters and their attempts at navigating a world that frustrates their understanding; and like the aforementioned authors, Powell's work is linguistically dexterous, possessed of a unique cadence and timbre. But unlike his aforementioned contemporaries, language in Powell's fictions is often suspect in a manner not present in the works of Crews and Hannah. Powell's narratives have much to say about a great many things, but his

characters, and particularly his male protagonists, often struggle to clearly articulate their desires, goals, and identities. His first novel, *Edisto* (1984) is a coming of age story set in South Carolina, and focuses on a precocious young boy's struggle to understand his relationship to adults, his place in the world, and the economic realities that surround and encroach upon his idyllic, largely wealthy upbringing. Narrated by twelve-year-old Simons Manigault, *Edisto* explores privilege, class, and an adolescent's transition into adulthood, and interrogates the failure of discourse, specifically that which originates with Simons and Taurus, the novel's primary male characters, to articulate male desires and fears. Men in *Edisto* try and fail to make themselves understood; Simons never fully captures in words his looming fear of becoming an adult, and Taurus cannot tell the woman he loves, a woman who is much smarter and more accomplished than him, the depths of his feelings for her. Later novels, such as *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men* (2000) and *The Interrogative Mood* (2009), take this to extremes; in the former, a woman's fantasies in writing first overtake her grocery list, then her reality, and in the latter's formal structure: *The Interrogative Mood* is a "novel" in name only, comprised solely of wry, often humorous questions that arrive, ultimately, at nothing that remotely resembles a traditional narrative arc.

If *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men* examines a woman's point of view, and if *The Interrogative Mood's* relentless questioning has no specific narrative identity, they are the exceptions. Most of Powell's novels and short stories are about men and their failures to communicate, and few of his works focus on this failure of male discourse as intensely as his second novel, *A Woman Named Drown* (1987), a book that closely examines men, their identities, and the failure of male discourse to adequately describe

the overwhelming sense of estrangement generated by the intersection of masculinity and capitalism. The plot of *Drown*, as much as it can be said to have a plot, is best summed up as follows: Al, a graduate student of inorganic chemistry at the University of Tennessee, discovers that his girlfriend has left him while traveling abroad, and his roommate, Tom, has graduated and married. Suddenly bereft of friends and lovers, Al begins a pattern of quitting, leaving his graduate program and the university, his lodgings, and finally Knoxville entirely in an attempt to quantify what makes people do what they do, be who they are.

Al begins his life of intentional purposelessness by seeking an “energy of activation,” a force that drives Al to surround himself with, and hopefully become, one of the “people who are anything but the custodians of their chances in life” (14). For Al, quitting means ceasing to be the “custodian” of his own life, to give up control over what he does, who he does it with, and the subsequent outcomes. His desire, then, is to relinquish control over the direction and shape of his life, to abdicate, as the word “custodianship” implies, any and all responsibility for arranging his life (cleaning up, in a sense) according to external dictates--culture, social practices, and so forth. Embedded in this protracted quitting is a desire to quit his own identity, to try on, at times like a set of clothes, new unfamiliar masculine identities, and to discover within them something that resonates as true and genuine. The problem is that the novel dispels such identities early, casting them as fictitious constructs whose sole purpose is to serve as a punchline. Al and Tom create Fenster Ludge, a man who does not in fact exist, but who nonetheless has a desk in their graduate office. Before long, they are told by colleagues that someone matching the description of Ludge has been seen about campus, and Al

and Tom, unwilling to dispel the rumor, allow the gag to run its course: "Tom created Fenster Ludge when he discovered that one carrel in a suite of eight was empty. He made out a nameplate for the empty space, provided Fenster with some of his own books and supplies, and then began to ask his six new colleagues in the suite if anyone had seen 'this Fenster Ludge guy'" (5-6). Here, a fictive man and his fictive identity are only as real as the material objects that credibly assure others of his existence, one of many instances in the text where men are defined by their materiality, by the objects *and* social practices that validate and confirm their existence.

What Tom's gag reveals, then, is the connection between men, reality, and the objects that tether the two together. Al and Tom exist regardless of their personal effects, but the *fact* of their existence is of little social import; as Fenster Ludge shows us, the objects that *imply* existence work to create a far more powerful sense of tangible existence in the minds of others. Men in *Drown* are more aptly and concretely defined by objects than by deeper, more substantive components of identity, and what Al seeks in quitting his custodianship is an opportunity to sever this connection, to divorce himself from the objects that (in conjunction with social practices) shape his masculine identity. This quitting functions as a narrative theme, one that operates on a meta-textual level as an examination of the shift in personal and cultural values from one era to another. Fredric Jameson describes it as an "inverted millenarianism," one that marks a substantive macro-scale shift in cultural awareness: "premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is

increasingly called postmodernism" (1). Viewed through Jameson's lens, Al's attempt to quit the social practices that shape and determine his identity mark a personal, and likely cultural, shift into postmodernism, a term and genre that many attribute to Powell's works; Al may not be concerned with literary conventions and genres (he's not, after all, a graduate student of English), but he is most seriously concerned with the "custodianship" of himself, a term that lends both a sense of ownership and economic investment in the governance of one's identity.

Powell's novel, written in 1987, takes place in the same decade, one in which the United States shifted hard to the right under Reagan, one in which "trickle-down" economics were still held by some as a credible and potentially viable means of creating economic equity. Two years after *Drown* was published, the Berlin Wall fell, and two years after that the Soviet Union was dissolved. To say that the 1980s saw radical shifts in domestic and international ideas of politics and identity is to put it mildly, and if *Drown* seems unconcerned with the rapidly changing world around it, this is merely narrative semantics, a sleight of hand where Powell's laser-focus on the internal world of white Southern men reveals, in a manner similar to Hannah's *Ray*, that those men are woefully unprepared for the personal and social challenges the world is about to usher to their doorsteps, even those with massive economic windfalls. And though Crews's *The Knockout Artist* was published a year after *Drown*, its central theme--that of fragmented male identity and the desperate need to escape hegemonic social practices--only reinforces the estrangement, silence, and unspoken privilege that Powell's contemplates. That isn't to say that Crews and Powell are necessarily close kin in writing--not in tone, and not in subject matter except to the extent that their subject

matter pertains to men, their bodies, and identity. But where Powell's lyrical whimsy lends a lighter, breezier tone to his works, Crews's positions itself as the darker, brooding terminal point of the problems with masculinity that first appeared in Hannah's *Ray*. In tracing these shifting understandings of white Southern masculinity from Hannah to Powell, I argue that the work of these authors (and Crews) represents what Richard Boswell describes as a "paradigm shift," one that stretches, roughly, from the end of the Vietnam War to the 1990s in which "the general collection of perceptions, principles, and practices that make up a shared vision of reality for a particular culture" are over time radically altered (35). Boswell sees paradigm shifts operating on two (though by no means exclusively two) levels: in reality as it is generally, perhaps centrally, understood as a composite of cultures, languages, and social practices, and within narrative that contends with reality, attempts to either relate to, or contest reality, and constructs a narrative paradigm of its own (36-37). Al's succession of quitting represents an interesting approach to grappling in narrative with the paradigm shifts of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Placed in conversation with *The Knockout Artist* and *Ray*, *Drown* fits neatly between these in a mode of analytic contemplation, probing the origin points of white Southern masculinity in the hopes of finding some other alternative, some other terminal point than the one at which Crews arrives, or the insatiable consumption and desire Hannah's emphasizes.

Despite my above comparisons between Powell's novel and those of Crews and Hannah, there are some key distinctions. For all the shenanigans with space, time, and what it means to be Southern in Hannah's novel, there is nonetheless a sense that Ray (though not necessarily Hannah) believes there may yet be (and certainly was at one

point) some definite *Southernness* to be had, some specific component to Ray's Southern identity inextricable from the region. Powell, on the other hand, seems little concerned with the South as a specific geographic coordinate or a locale in which a specific identity is generated; as we'll see in the discussion to follow, AI may be curious about why, for example, the Florida he imagines is so radically different in tone and materiality from the one he encounters on his road trip with Mary, but Powell seems to regard the South as a once-mythic place into which the contemporary Southerner no longer quite fits. In this way, Powell serves as one of many contemporary Southern writers who, according to Tara McPherson, "have sketched the contours of a southern subject who has little truck with the familiar figures of southern mythologies, structuring the space for a new southern identity" (10). McPherson's book, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* examines how mythic discursive narratives of the South have long obscured ugly truths about race and gender in Southern history and popular culture, and much of her argument, along with the work of Lewis P. Simpson, forms the basis for what later writers would more firmly describe as the "postsouthern," an idea of the South divorced from the mythic Agrarianism that has long muddied its intellectual and artistic streams. The South in *Drown* is cut off from any essentially Southern qualities; AI is as concerned with a Southern identity as Powell, which is to say neither seem to give it much thought.

It's important to note, however, that while *Drown* is largely unconcerned with tethering the South to essential characteristics of identity, it's not blind to the idea that Southern identity may just as well be influenced by what the rest of the country wants it (or, in the case of commodification, *needs* it) to be. James Cobb's book, *Away Down*

South, explores this concept at length, and charts the historical transfiguration of Southern identity across various social, cultural, and political issues. Cobb argues that “identity is not a matter of simply deciding either to be different or remain the same” (339), a stance that captures well the tone of *Drown*. However much Al seeks to change his life and circumstances, he winds up in a position remarkably similar to the one he left--a position decided as much by him as by external (familial) forces. There’s a sense of powerlessness at the heart of Powell’s novel, an idea that one can only discover who and what one is by conscious immersion in, and movement through, history. As Al’s neighbor, the Orphan puts it, “She was in history, she now solemnly announced, ‘to assemble the skills necessary to discover my true identity’” (19). And for all that Al’s dry reporting of the dialog can be taken for sarcasm or ridicule, he finds himself on a similar journey of assemblage. At the end of his journey, Al will find something, but whether it’s a “true identity,” a reasonable facsimile of one, or nothing at all is difficult to say; Al is not, the novel tells us, the sole architect of his identity, an idea with which, expanded to the level of regional and social identities, Cobb agrees: “Certainly, if [the South’s] history is any guide, the southern identity of the future will reflect not just what southerners themselves have chosen to make it but what other Americans need or want it to be as well” (339). Al’s quest for the “energy of activation” is as much about understanding who he is as a man as it is about understanding what that term means in a regional and social sense. The South and a sense of Southern identity may not bear down very powerfully on Al, but as a subject within its socio-political boundaries, it nonetheless impacts what determines his sense of personal, masculine identity.

Socially and politically, however, the South remains a cultural force. The South represented in *Drown* may (to Al) be disconnected from any intrinsic sense of Southernness, but it nonetheless impacts the people who live within its geographical borders. Here it's worth considering Martyn Bone's book *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* and his discussion of postsouthern cartographies, ways of thinking about the South as a place under constant revision, a place in which the "region we have known and narrated as 'the South' may no longer be primarily agrarian--it may in fact have ceased to exist as a distinctive economic-geographical entity--but the social practice and production of place continues. Whether one likes it or not, capitalist land speculation and real-estate development play a major role in the reproduction--the creative destruction--of traditional 'southern' loci" (42). Bone's emphasis on capitalist development of the material South as the primary social practice for the construction of identity carries a lot of weight with Powell's novel. Al is, after all, the heir to a successful oil pipe mogul, and money is of no concern to him. *Drown* examines how capitalism and masculinity are interwoven in the construction of a postsouthern identity, how each supports the other, buttressing its position of economic of gendered dominance, and whether or not there's any viable alternative to that.

By asking us to consider white (post)Southern men and their masculinities at the juncture of radical domestic and global change, the novel examines the contact points between the body and ideology, between gender and capitalism, and how their junction points create an "economy of identity," a term I use to summarize the political and economic system in which various social practices operate and the means of production and distribution of identity as social practices, as the central recurring theme in *A*

Woman Named Drown. Al's attempts at quitting mark his journey as one of estrangement from this economy of identity, and, ultimately, the failure of male discourse to capture and express a successful transition. Estrangement, then, is a key term for this chapter. I hope to show that the failure of masculine discourse *about* masculine identity and men's bodies underlines the grotesque nature of white Southern masculinity in *Drown*, a masculinity inextricably tied to an economy of identity.

Estrangement and the Failure of Male Discourse

In seeking to quit "custodianship" over his life, Al seeks to extricate himself (and future iterations of his masculine identity) from the economy of identity discussed above. This is, unsurprisingly, a complex process, one that spans the length of the novel and, arguably, never fully resolves. But if *Drown* refuses to offer closure to Al's experiment, it's willing to explore how Al is oriented as a subject, and more specifically as a male subject, and the implications are dire. Upon quitting his doctorate, Al tells us: "I walked out into the bright afternoon feeling truly released, as if out of the army or prison, and felt this relief most oddly for not having known before it any real oppression. I don't not yet know the components of the feeling, a kind of deep-breath, first-of-spring freshness" (7). As the tense shifts between past and present, Al's subject position in time--or more accurately, in history--also shifts. To be a male subject, a man, and maybe even a *masculine* man is, like the defined contours of the life he was living, perhaps *too* defined, compared as they are to the "army," or more precisely a "prison," predominantly male social institutions. There is, Al tells us, a kind of punitive bondage associated with a life proscribed by an economy of identity. Just the hint of some other

way of constituting himself offers “relief” a newness of identity that, as indicated by the “first-of-spring freshness,” is both rejuvenating and life-affirming.

In contrast to continual engagement with hegemonic social practices, Al’s brand of quitting punitive (“prison”) economies of identity provides a potential launching point for the constitution of a new subjectivity, a new masculine identity on the periphery of dominant systems of classification and power. At the very least, Al is attempting to distance himself from the Fenster Ludge-esque masculinity of object-embodiment, and toward an identity less reliant on material objects. By drawing attention to the relationship between bodies, identities, and objects, and how each distinguishes the other as Other, *Drown* asks us to consider this grotesque suture of bodies and to objects as a *consequence* of the social practices that generate, coordinate, and cement bodies as material objects first, and subjects second (if at all). As Donnie Secreast points out, this emphasis on bodies and objects is not uncommon in contemporary grotesque narratives in which attention is drawn to the “tenuous distinctions between human and nonhuman existence, and to the role that language plays in the power dynamics between the sexes” (65). While Secreast’s analysis focuses on the work of Sylvia Plath, his observation about contemporary grotesque narratives holds true for *Drown*’s emphasis on the relationship between male bodies, objects, and their connection to the world(s) around them. The dominant narrative tone and mode, humor, works in conjunction with this dialectical tension to create what Secreast describes as a “new knowledge system, which challenges the reader, the social order, and even the language with which it is written” (73). This “new knowledge system” is more precisely defined as the reader’s reaction to the grotesque, the discomfort that makes possible

grotesque articulation *and* the dynamic, life-affirming laughter that redirects uncomfortable scrutiny back upon dominant social orders.

To be clear, this is far from a guaranteed force of liberatory change; the grotesque is ambivalent in its political application, and comedy and laughter can be directed *by* hegemonic forces with the same relative ease as they can be targeted. This complicated and nuanced approach is represented in the novel through the “new knowledge system” of Al’s notes, the narrative itself, and by the power and privilege Al is poised to inherit. As the son of a successful drilling-supply company owner, Al is already wealthy to the tune of “a two-million-dollar net thing,” heir to the company and its vast holdings. Quitting might be on Al’s docket, but millions of dollars in surplus capital makes for a pretty cushy safety net. Nonetheless, Al’s discomfort with his power and privilege, and the general unease of men throughout the narrative, align them with what David Anshen calls “curious folk” in the works of Faulkner, individuals who reject the object-laden, materialistic structures intended to define them, folk who “cannot or will not assimilate into the dominant framework of society, even if the rewards of that society dangle in their faces . . . despite outside pressures, these folk remain strange” (483). Strange and *estranged*, the grotesque qualities of *Drown* stem from the narrative itself, from Al’s analysis of the world as it appears, and his recognition that a different world exists, one distinct, and potentially disconnected from, the material conditions and social orders of the former. For Al, this other world *seems* to hold the potential of authentic reality, or rather, *an* authentic reality distinct and promising from the one in which he has until that point participated. In other words, the grotesque as it functions in this novel pivots on the mode’s (and the narrative’s) otherworldly quality, namely that

reality as Al and readers perceive it is one of *many* potential realities, some of which offer alterity in configurations of identity. In Al's case, and in the case for many real-world, real-life men, the reality he and they have come to know is, as this study has detailed, heavily dependent upon masculine identity, its delineation by dominant socio-political power structures, and the exertion of it as a form of social, political, and personal domination over others.

The *other* reality, hinted at by the presence of the grotesque, is one in which the complicated tangle of power, masculinity, and all manner of complex political and social structures are either decoupled or, at the least, untangled enough to begin building something different. This is why, despite Al's forthcoming inheritance, he is also very much aware of how such power and privilege is used to create and maintain the masculinity he now seeks to quit: "I had been occupied, I suppose, with a kind of disguised rich boy's finding himself before assuming the obligation of the family fortune, and I had been doing it correctly, I thought, as I could" (8). The "obligation," identified as masculine from the possessive "boy's" that precedes it, is passed from father to son, a patrilineal transfer of capital, prestige, and power, a transfer that defines both the "obligation" and the "applying" of Al's faculties to the endeavor of maintaining the means of production. In other words, the ultimate goal of masculinity--the singular end-state that Al attempts to quit, and ultimately returns to in altered form--is the preservation of capitalism.

This relationship between masculinity and capitalism is a core theme in *Drown*, one that lends a specific connotation to the "custodianship" Al sidesteps, and one that allows us to examine the novel as a commentary about the development of white

Southern masculinity in tandem with, and as a result of, capitalism. In “Gender’s Value in the History of Capitalism,” Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor asks us to consider how over time individual elements of a market economy became inextricably linked with gender, and more specifically, how the consolidation of domestic norms and ideals was centralized in capital itself. She writes: “How that [capital] was shared, and how a distribution of power accompanied the disposition of money within households, has critical implications for a gendered economic history In both cases, the gendered disposition of money and labor profoundly shaped economic outcomes, including the development of capitalism itself” (618). Much as this “gendered disposition” of capital and power shaped capitalism, so too did capitalism influence the disposition of gender; as noted in the introduction, twentieth-century masculinity may have begun largely as a middle class consolidation of diverse nineteenth century manhoods, but it has developed into a great many *masculinities*, some (such as that discussed in Chapter 1) of which have abandoned class as the crucial marker of identity. Still others have developed in closer connection with class and the distribution (or lack thereof) of capital; Deborah Dixon and John Grimes posit that ecological development and capitalist profit are often conflated with masculine identity, and very often in direct opposition to a “feminised private sphere of childrearing and family management” (270). Though heir to his father’s oil-related business, Al is often infantilized by his parents and his lover, Mary, and while we’ll later return to these ideas in greater detail, I want to emphasize that *Drown* shows us the continuation of this process, that the connection between male power and privilege and capitalist prestige remain generationally connected and historically pervasive beyond the middle class. As noted in the previous chapter, I argue

that masculinity is not so much *in* crisis as *a* crisis of historic and catastrophic proportions, and here I argue that *Drown*'s emphasis on the relationship between men, their bodies and identities, and the development and perpetuation of capitalism adds another dimension to this crisis. Masculinity is a crisis of the body, of subjectivity, and of a dominant economic system in global culture.

The novel addresses this on a much smaller scale, examining the deeply personal ways in which masculinity can be publicly scrutinized and revised. Not long after quitting the university, Al takes up with Mary Constance, an actress and the eponymous Drown of the novel's title, who takes him on a road trip to Florida. Dressed in her ex-husband's clothes, what Al describes as a "canary golfer's ensemble" (42), Al becomes a prop for Mary at a roadside gas station:

If there's anything dorkier than a man wearing a yellow golf suit behind a filling station with a bunch of the boys in their jeans and pearl-button shirts, I suppose it's a man wearing a yellow gold suit with the Ban-Lon shirt tucked in and the pants drawn up high showing a lot of sock. This was Mary's method: she effected a little drama under the oak by charming the men and then leaving with the fruit she called handsome, and it was my job to look even more geeky to further tweak them. (84)

Al's false queerness ("the fruit") is used to confound the expectations of other, presumably heterosexual men, but sexuality is merely a tease here--or at least, not the primary focus of this performance. Mary's "method" is, after all, a carnivalesque performance in which no distinction exists between spectators and performers, one in which the mature ("man") appearance of queerness is preferred to the childish "boys," themselves engaged in performative displays of masculinity via their "jeans" and "pearl-button shirts" (note here the conspicuous link between prosperity and masculinity found in the "pearl" that is nonetheless outdone by the "Ban-Lon"). Mary's choice is one of

performative economics; the more visibly affluent individual is her “handsome” choice, even if he--and the rest of the men--are merely actors in her “little drama.” In the staging and composition of this performance--itself performative of the performative--*Drown* emphasizes the grotesque performative aspect of gender and identity, and questions whether legitimate masculine alterity is even possible.

It’s worth noting that Mary is an interesting, complex character, able to wield an authority the likes of which Al cannot. Though she casts Al as her lover and confidante, and even dresses him in her ex-husband’s ridiculous attire, she eventually tires of him and leaves him at a roadside motel:

We had taken the motel room, showered, and I sat down near the door. Mary sat on the bed, her arms on her knees, leaning toward me like a father. “There’s nothing personal in this,” she said.

“In what?”

“You can take the Merc or the two thousand.”

I looked at her, and the color TV, on a stand about eye level with me. I mulled this one over until I found myself playing with my lips and stopped. (99-100)

Mary’s natural authority, compared via the simile “like” to a “father,” overwhelms Al. He sits, playing with lips in a gesture of childish befuddlement, attempting to decipher what precisely her terms mean. But that’s just the thing: they don’t mean anything. Mary’s terms are her own, and the relationship concludes with a business transaction, an impersonal (“nothing personal”) dismissal that parodies sexist gags about who gets what in a divorce--the house and the kids here becomes “the Merc or the two thousand,” and the fact that the “or” requires a decision that the “and” of the former phrase occludes only cements the idea that Mary, not Al, is and has always been in the literal and figurative driver seat. Curiously, this scene foreshadows the novel’s climactic confrontation between Al and his father, one in which Al finally capitulates to taking over

the family oil pipe business and lays to rest his purposeless designs. In that scene (covered later) as in this scene, Al is cast as a hesitant child who, unable to articulate precisely what he wants (much less *who* or *what* he is) must take what is on offer.

Unlike Al, Mary doesn't seem to bear the burden of any crisis of identity or purpose; purposelessness suits her, or at least the outward appearance of purposelessness. When Mary returns to Knoxville, she also returns to her house, to the theater, and to the life she lived before Al showed up. In other words, if masculinity is something Al performs through purposeless wandering and eventual capitulation to capitalist industry, purposelessness is Mary's real performance. She may be a skilled actress, but Mary's identity (and the identity of women in the novel) is understood by men as defined, fixed and specific, something Al tells us when he notes that she "was generally not in favor of my associating her with her roles She was not in favor of anyone mistaking her for a play character" (55). Unlike Fenster Ludge, the made-up man realized by his representative material objects, or Al, the real man in search of a made-up sense of purposeless wandering, Mary easily dons new names and appearances and just as easily sheds them. Mary, like Wallace after her (whom I will discuss later), and even Al's mother who suffers from an undisclosed mental disorder, knows *who* and *what* she is in a way that Al, right up until he caves and accepts his place as his father's heir, cannot.

Before she ditches Al, though, she acts as a tour guide to both the geographic locales they visit and the vistas of identity they explore. More specifically, the performative context in which hers and Al's relationship is moored creates a space where alterity can be explored via such performance. This question of alterity and its

potential highlights how powerful the theme of estrangement is in the novel. What does genuine alterity look like, and where can it be found? As Al and Mary drive south, they encounter their answers in the form of--what else?--Florida:

I saw no palms, no monkeys, no fruit, no glare. A red neon WHISKEY shone from the liquor store.

As if reading my thoughts exactly, Mary said, in an affected redneck accent, "Me and Stump believed in a *differnt kind* of Florida."

We passed a strip of ruined nontowns, Yulee, Oceanway, Lackawanna. Old motels, those still standing, were either apartments or flea markets. Some were just rubble in a sandy semi-circle of ragged palms. (76-77)

Geographically and geopolitically, the novel moves southward, deeper into the South as a cultural region and site for the construction of object-identity as indicated by the way things--"palms," "monkeys," "fruit," and "glare"--were supposed to confirm for Al the *Floridaness* of Florida and have failed to do so. In fact, failure might be too gentle a word; the indicators of Florida as Al expects them are completely absent from the landscape in which Al and Mary find themselves, and Mary's remark about a "*differnt*" kind of Florida hints that it never existed in the first place. Rather than find a Florida that confirms their upper-class ideas of a permanent vacation paradise, they encounter the rude and crude reality of economic depravity that grips much of the state. If Al expected a recognizable semi-tropical aspect of the greater South, a place that conforms to fantasies of the South and Southernness, the apocalyptic landscape of "ragged" flora and fauna and derelict "rubble" rejects fantasy entirely. What it offers instead is a terrain that reminds us how Al's and Mary's upper-class expectations have little in common with reality, a terrain that renders Al mute.

Of course meaningful discourse fails in Florida. That is--and I speak from experience here--a most Florida approach to communication. But the sudden crushing

realization that the Florida Al expected is the farthest thing from the Florida he encounters is a micro-scale version of what the novel continuously emphasizes as its main theme: estrangement. Here, as so often happens in the novel, male discourse fails to articulate the discomfort produced by an encounter with the grotesque nature of postsouthern reality in the South--the juxtaposition of things that should not (and nevertheless *do*) commingle. Florida, then, is simply the object, the instrument through which grotesque discomfort is generated. Estranged from his expectations *and* an identifiable, authentic "Florida," Al is faced with an uncomfortable truth: Florida, like the South, is less a defined place and more of a collection of ideas about *places* and cultures. Worse, the totality of which, represented by the commerce of "liquor stores" and "flea markets," are merely extensions of capitalism. Richard Gray argues that this cultural pluralism is part of postmodernity and reinforces the link between gender, capitalism, and region until "we are faced, not so much with Southern culture, really, as with Southern cultures" (361). Faced with a plurality of Souths, one is also faced with a plurality of Southern cultures, some of which have been manufactured (perhaps literally) to create cultures expressly committed to capitalist reproduction of themselves (or like-minded cultures).

What shocks Al on the unconscious level, hinted at in the "nontowns" through which they pass, is an awareness of this grotesque system of fabrication in which region and commerce are embodied in flesh just as much as brick and mortar buildings. The apocalyptic description of Florida is, according to Lee Quinby, not simply fitting for the scene, but an apt summation of the dominant narrative of order, nationally and regionally (84). Al's desperate need to quit his traditional and assumed masculine duties

is what Quinby calls the “paradigm of masculinity fantasy” that incorporates subjectivity as constituted through social practices and their effects on the body (86-87). Much like the Florida Al imagined, this paradigm represents a different reality, one that attempts to distance itself from the world as it truly exists. Even when Al posits himself as an impartial observer, a collector of data and experiences, he cannot escape the privilege of class into which he was born, and his “paradigm of masculine fantasy” lies ultimately in a position above the working class. When he and Mary stop to stroll through an orange grove worked by migrants, Al notes that they “may have looked like a welfare team, reporters, a landed woman and her heir, I do not know” (91). But Al isn’t being completely honest with us. He does know, and a sentence later, he makes this explicitly clear: “We would look at the workers from the edge of the action; the workers at us from cherry pickers, trucks, pallets of fruit. Mary, wearing a sweater cape-style, would walk on after a spell, as if the operations were satisfactory. I followed, a young man pulled for these inspections from a golf course” (91). Here, Al’s emphasis on upper class affect cannot go unnoticed: the “cape-style” sweater, their voyeuristic position at the “edge of the action,” a phrase that lends an erotic quality to watching the workers labor, casting of Mary as the overseer who decides when (and if) the work is “satisfactory,” and even Al’s casting of himself as the Southern man of leisure, the “heir” taken reluctantly from his golf game to accompany his “landed woman” on a tour of her Florida orange grove, all of it reinforces the class privilege to which Al is accustomed, the upper-crust lens through which he views the world. Gender and class commingle here, reliant upon each other to define the body. Al, after all, gets to be a “young man,” and Mary a “woman,” while the workers “the workers,” are definite only in their article (“the”).

Contrary to earlier passages that actively worked to dispel traditional notions of the South, the scene discussed above reverses course to reinforce ideas of white Southern gentry, masculine and feminine alike/ Therein lies the postmodern American masculinity, an apocalyptic commingling of incompatible identities simultaneously created for and by the male body's engagement with capitalism and regional culture. The apocalypse, as it manifests in American literary narratives, may well be a thoroughly grotesque circumstance, but for Powell, this is simply par for course. As John Moran notes, Powell's work is marked by its examination of "how white southern masculinity seems outside the norm, always too effeminate, or else too masculine" (96). *Drown's* willingness to reinforce *and* subvert regional expectations and emphasize masculine passivity doesn't quite make it a subversive work, and certainly not a liberatory work, but it does work to direct scrutiny toward the machinations of gender, capitalism, and region, and in so doing helps to question the "custodianship" of masculine identity.

Quitting and Custodianship

While the previous section discusses the nature of the custodianship Al seeks to quit, the question remains: Why quit it? There is, the novel tells us, good reason to do this. Masculinity is, in the hands of those who continue their custodianship, restrictive and potentially dangerous--to themselves and those around them. After Al quits his doctoral program, he gets a job in a factory sewing tents. His coworkers, almost exclusively other men, take no small joy in pulling Al (whom they refer to as "the new girl") into conversations about the nature of men and women. The most vocal of the bunch, a man named Sweetlips--whose name, along with Al's nickname, implies a great

deal about how homosocial relationships are characterized in the mechanized industrial setting of the factory--captures this during the following exchange:

Near me a man was announcing how we were to distinguish male from female rattlesnakes. "You all better listen to this," he said, concentrating on his stitching. "It's valuable."

"Shut up, Sweetlips," a second man said from a nearby machine.

"O.K., fine," Sweetlips said. "*Don't* find out. I could care less. But the fact of the matter is females don't have any poison and if you know *that*, you're safe." He bent to his stitching.

"Tell it to the new girl."

"Do you know how to tell a female rattler?" Sweetlips said to me.

"No. How?"

"They don't have any rattles." With that he placed a large paper cup on the floor under his machine and pissed in it from his sitting position. (26-27)

The scene, set among tasks traditionally relegated to women ("stitching," mentioned twice) is nonetheless framed as gruff locker-room talk, the sort of conversation that, as a discourse *about* women, is passed *solely* between men. This contrast--the traditionally feminine commingled with the traditionally masculine--repeats, thematically and materially, in the substance of Sweetlips's joke. Male rattlesnakes, not females, contain the "venom," and thus even here, among men in the company of men, there is a tacit and explicit acknowledgement that men (and by proxy masculinity) are dangerous, and femininity, defined in part by its lack (of "rattlers") poses little harm. That men and their bodies are somehow repulsive or toxic is reinforced when Sweetlips pisses "from his sitting position" in a manner not dissimilar to how a woman might be expected to piss; that he does this directly after discussing what female rattlesnakes lack links the action--bodily evacuation--with the embodiment (a lack of rattlers). In other words, as Sweetlips describes the lack that makes female rattlers, an obvious if thinly veiled allusion to human women, he also empties himself in a manner that bears more than a passing resemblance to milking a snake.

The men with whom Al surrounds himself are wary of themselves, and of other men, in a way that expresses their unique discomfort with the knowledge of who and what they are; Sweetlips seems to know what Al has begun to deduce, that men and masculinity are fixed in place (by other men) in order to maintain social and economic systems of power and privilege, and his response--pissing in a cup--indicates the confusion and futility of actions taken to overturn this balance of power. The placement of this scene in a factory helps to illustrate the connection between systems of commerce and identity, and how disruptions to long-standing gendered labor traditions have confused men. As Michael Kimmell points out, many men of the era, “[b]uffeted by changes not of their making, increasingly anxious in an economic and political arena that erodes their ability to be breadwinners, and confused by new demands about emotional responsiveness and involved fatherhood, men seem uncomfortable in that new spotlight, shifting uncomfortably, shielding their eyes, even railing against the glare” (2). Of course, what Al and Sweetlips are here acknowledging is that the “spotlight” is of their own making--set up by men to coordinate and conduct men in the perpetuation of social orders and social practices that serve as the political and economic power structures that--you guessed it--serve to maintain men’s positions *within* those structures. Men were the ones who screwed in the light bulb in the first place, and the “glare” here is the “anxious” arenas in which they not only compete with women for positions of dominance and power, but *each other*.

For all this says about men, it says a great deal more about a specific subset of men--namely working class white men and their sense of masculine viability. Al’s foray into working class identity, temporary as it may be, presents him with an opportunity

(afforded by his privilege) to explore what Sherry Linkon describes as “the mythology surrounding productive labor,” the kind that emphasized “associated benefits of the family wage, labor solidarity, and physical prowess” (148). And much like his time in graduate school studying inorganic chemistry, Al’s time working in the tent factory offers little in the way of satisfaction. He tells us: “My previous life, of the soft-metal bonding mechanics, seemed no less preposterous than Sweetlips’s life of pygmy sightings and giant strength. I was completely comfortable being completely out of control” (29). In the comparison of “soft-metal bonding mechanics” to “pygmy sightings and giant strength” is a grotesque commingling fact and fiction, objects and bodies, into a single, “no less preposterous” subjective view of the world. The “previous life” has given way to a new (middle class) life, one which Al immediately discards with casual, satiric ennui. In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions*, John Clark describes the function of the satire in the grotesque as a lens with which to analyze this ennui and its reliance on a postmodern context of social structures and identity:

As we move further and further into our own century and as our topic widens its sphere, we observe how many literary works become preoccupied with almost a total existential and surrealistic absurdity, dealing with the *la nausée* in a mad, tedious, sisyphian world from which there is no exit . . . the prevailing image of man we find in modern art is one of impotence, uncertainty, and self-doubt. (113)

And while ennui is part of what Al experiences, much of what prompts him to begin his process of quitting--the underlying answer to “*Why quit in the first place?*”--is, as his co-worker’s joke indicates, also a matter of the body, of gender and embodiment in which the mythologies (here social practices) that shape and reify certain masculine configurations of subjectivity are revealed as “anxious arenas,” sites of nervous, deliberately misleading selfhood. Female rattlers have venom and rattlers, and

Sweetlips's "fact" about the differences between males and females won't save anyone's lives. To the contrary, such facts are likely to get someone killed.

Much as a rattlesnake sheds its skin, so too do men in *Drown* shed their masculinity, and don a new one. Upon meeting Mary, Al is invited to her home, and after a drunken nap, dresses in her former husband's clothes, and is able to ingratiate himself to Mary's friends; Hoop, a friend of Mary's and a former Navy sailor who served alongside Mary's ex-husband, put it thus: "This boy's all right, Constance!" (43). Al is all right, but he's no longer a man. He's a "boy," a term that Hoop uses to create a sense of camaraderie, but that nonetheless indicates the relationship between Mary and Al; the former is very much in control, a parent-like lover, and the latter is completely at her whim. By donning the ex-husband's clothes, Al becomes to Mary both surrogate husband *and* surrogate son. Hoop closes the deal, so to speak, on accepting Al as Mary's consort with a handshake described by Al as "confirmational," then another that he follows with the phrase, "Sudden friggin death" (43). Hoop's statement, made in reference to beating "you youngsters" at billiards, also serves to confirm the transition from one identity to another, and from one masculinity (man) to another ("boy"). As both surrogate husband and son, though, Al is simultaneously man and "boy," a "youngster" and an acceptable consort to the worldly, experienced, older Mary. Rather than adopting a fractured masculinity (as I discussed with regards to *The Knockout Artist*), this grotesque doubling of masculine identity—grotesque precisely for its commingling of two things that should not be embodied simultaneously and for the "Sudden death" that converges here with life (represented by the affirming handshakes)—emphasizes the fluid, flexible nature of identity and gender in the novel.

Men in *Drown* are encouraged to distance themselves from the venom that comes with hegemonic masculinity by exploring masculinity's fluid boundaries--by flexing, so to speak, the definition of masculine. When Al first meets Mary, they quickly abandon traditional pleasantries for an entirely different sort of conversation:

I asked, without planning to, if I could take a shower.
"No ceremony here," she said, indicating another part of the house with her cue.
"Before I do," I added, again more or less surprising myself, "should you know me any better?"
"Like what?" she asked, looking up.
"I don't know. Job, name, sexual preference. That sort of thing."
"I thought you lads did away with that song and dance."
"We tried."
"Take a shower." (41)

In asking to clean himself, to literally rid himself of the day's dirt, Al is also attempting to—asking permission to--wash away the hegemonic markers of masculinity, the "Job" and "sexual preference" that traditionally link masculinity to capitalism and industriousness and heterosexuality (and by extension heteronormativity). Mary dismisses such notions as "song and dance," a remark that reminds Al (and readers) of the performative nature of gender, but also critiques the aforementioned link between masculinity, capitalism, and sexuality. Al's admission of masculine failure ("We tried") is only partly true; Al has quit a lot of things, certain constructions of masculinity included, but he's a long way away from laying to rest all the baggage of "Job, name, sexual preference;" they're still very much a part of him, and his willingness to clarify them to Mary indicates as much. To that end, Mary's directive, "Take a shower," is as much about cleaning off that failure as it is washing a male body.

Doing away with things--washing, quitting, the song and dance of gender performativity and social practices--is the novel's central preoccupation, a major and

emphatic theme that aligns the narrative with, of all things, the Southern Gothic, a genre that, according to Peggy Bailey often contains “significant elements” of the grotesque (270). While the divide between the Gothic and the grotesque lies beyond the scope of this study, it’s worth noting how they work in tandem in contemporary Southern fiction, often to “explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable. Southern Gothic literature is characterized by obsessive preoccupations--with blood, family, and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities . . . and home--and a compulsion to talk (or write) about these preoccupations” (Bailey 271). *Drown* may not be a Gothic novel, particularly in its wry, comical tone, but it does borrow Gothic elements, not the least of which is a reliance on grotesque renderings of characters and situations to create the uncanny via “obsessive preoccupations” as Al probes the limit of his white Southern masculinity, its relationship to “family and inheritance” (which I’ll discuss in detail later), and the compulsion to record his data, the narrative itself, in order to make sense of it all. What’s uncanny about *Drown* is the laying bare of a reality other than what was assumed to be real via the unfurling of narrative; the novel itself is the “incongruous, abnormal, ‘monstrous’ characters, situations, and events” that Bailey sees as integral to Southern Gothics and grotesques (270), and the whole of it is Al’s science experiment to see if there’s some other way of living, some other way of being a man. Al’s quitting as a whole, and his acknowledgement to Mary that men have failed to give up the “song and dance” of hegemonic masculinity in particular, is itself an admission of failure. As a man, Al may find himself in a protracted state of quitting this and that, but he, and men as a whole, have not, in fact, quite hegemonic masculinity.

Of course, Al hardly speaks for all men, and if *The Knockout Artist* and *Ray* offered us potential glimpses of masculine alterity, *Drown* offers, by this point in the narrative, something less optimistic. In admitting that men haven't, and perhaps *cannot* escape the social practices of hegemonic masculinity, Al essentially contradicts one of the major aspects of his quitting. His admission is, then, one of defeat, another instance of male discourse, particularly *about* men, failing to aid them in the construction of a stable, definite identity that exists outside (or even on the periphery of) hegemonic masculinity. And truth be told, failure accompanies Al throughout the novel. Mid-way through their trip to Florida, Mary leaves him and Al is forced to pick up work at a fish camp run by Wallace, a woman who, like Mary, is uninterested in small talk; she hires Al moments after meeting him, briefly explains his (mostly ceremonious) duties of talking with and assisting customers (there are hardly any customers to assist, but should some arrive, Al's job is to rent them a boat, and then *acquire* the newly rented boat at a nearby department store), and initiates the daily cleaning ritual: douse the wooden shack in Pine Sol, scrub until they are delirious on the fumes, and drink cold beers in the afternoon heat. There in the camp, this routine prompts Al to see himself as "the evolving product, now in a fish-camp retort with a new reagent not unlike--in fact, startlingly similar to--the last. Who governed these combinations? How could it all be a random walk?" (104-105). Cast as the "reagent," Wallace (and before her, Mary) becomes the cipher through which Al can understand and interpret his current position. She becomes, in chemical terms, that which mixes with other substances to test for reactions, and Al's male body becomes the substance under analysis, the "evolving product" that seeks to interpret, and possibly communicate, the nature of grotesque

reality; though masculinities are tasked with the preservation and perpetuation of capitalism, they are also a “product,” an object of value created for consumption in an economy of bodies.

Here, then, Al’s sense of estrangement, the sense that the “random walk” may not be so random, but a carefully controlled and manufactured experience meant to direct him (and men as a whole) into specific roles, creates a sense of crisis: Al sees himself as a kind of gendered object *within* a system of social structures, and what he believed to be his experiment of purposelessness is, in fact, full of purpose. That purpose, like the purpose of men and hegemonic masculinities within the dominant social structures of the U.S. South, is to protect and preserve capitalism, to defend it from attack, and to recommit the body to its reification via social practices that reinforce dominant constructions of gender. In this way, *Drown* shows men in a state of crisis distinct but no less acute than what we saw in *The Knockout Artist* and *Ray*; in fact, by framing masculinity as a of crisis of historical proportions, Hannah’s novel allows us to see Powell’s as an examination of what that means on a material, bodily level. Viewed in such a way, Al’s experiments are stunted attempts at probing the boundaries of masculine obligation to capitalism, and reflect a desire to defy what Mark Fisher (borrowing the term from Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek) calls “capitalist realism: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (6). Al’s realization is less about imagining alternatives to capitalism (he isn’t concerned with that), and more about imaging that men and masculinities may yet find some other role

to play, some other way to factor into the larger overall formula that nonetheless results in hegemonic masculinity.

What makes Al's searching experiment significant is the estrangement that accompanies it. Rather than find he is able to seamlessly fit into the many possible roles for which men might labor to protect and preserve capitalism (and thereby prove that they are, in fact, men), Al *fails* to do so. His data never allows him to draw any specific, totalizing conclusion, and his calculations, however desperate, never fully amount to a purposeless, aimless, surrender to . . . what? The question isn't rhetorical; in Fisher's model of capitalist realism, there's nothing else because to imagine something different is no longer possible. Yet Al does exactly that, and while his musings and meditations are far from liberatory, they are *exploratory* and critical. As he probes the crossroads of masculinity and capitalism, his estrangement from *and within* dominant social structures allows us to see his much-sought "energy of activation" as a critique of subjectivity, what Benjamin Noys calls "our experience of crisis and austerity, which capitalist realism is supposed to naturalize and justify" (159). For Noys, as for Fisher, moments such as Al's questioning who controls ("governed") the "combinations" of masculinity, capitalism, and the real, are themselves "experiences of estrangement that not registered the forms of high capitalism in their psychic dimensions but that also promised us liberation from them. The breakdown of capitalist realism is not only a breakdown of capitalism but also a breakdown of *realism*" (161). This function of estrangement as a force for critical scrutiny and potential (though, admittedly, unrealized in the novel) alterity is Al's "energy of activation," and what is being activated is two-fold: an awareness of masculinity and subjectivity in the overall structures of capitalism as they function in dominant social

practices, and an emergent or potential identity that seeks an alternative from the dominant configuration. Al's experiment in purposelessness doesn't guarantee results, but that may very well be the point. As Bruce Wiebe notes in discussing the novel and its exploration of men, "Padgett Powell seems, with his sardonic gaze obliquely touching the world of men, to be developing a new form: the comedy of oblivion" (4).

For Al, this breakdown of realism is the realization that masculinity is part of larger social practices that direct men to preserve capitalist realism, a not-so-subtle nudge toward object-embodiment that defines men by the material objects they produce. It ensures they are as much an object as the commodities they produce, and yet, as the narrative draws to a close, Al capitulates to everything he purported to quit; he returns to his doctoral program, agrees to take over his father's business, and returns to Knoxville no worse for wear. Paired together, these radically disparate narrative threads generate a peculiar comic sense of disharmony in the novel, what Philip Thompson calls "the most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque" (20). We see this embodied most powerfully in Bonaparte, a mute man of indeterminate age who endlessly bails water from a sunken boat at the fish-camp. In many ways, Bonaparte is Al if the latter proves successful at quitting everything he purports to quit. He's also the comic conundrum at the heart of the story, the man reduced to social incontinence through active inaction, and a reminder of the body-reflexive nature of masculinity and social practices. After all, Donald Moss reminds us that "[m]asculinity, of course, like femininity, invariably knows itself as a doctrine of command over sequences of excitement, control and release But no version of masculinity includes incontinence and helplessness in its list of required particulars"

(41). If Bonaparte bails *in reaction* to his helplessness, it's just as likely his bailing *is* masculine helplessness embodied, a bizarre and comically uncomfortable example of masculinity trapped in the confines of its own creations, trapped despite its best efforts at bailing in a sinking boat that is itself mired in the much larger, much deeper body of social and political processes (the lake).

We see a similar helplessness in Tom, Al's former roommate who forsook Knoxville for a job, a wife, and all trappings from which Al has worked so hard to divest himself. Before Al returns home to confront his father (and a decision about his failed purposelessness), he detours to Decatur, Alabama, to see his old friend, only to discover that much of the man's jovial, goofy demeanor has been replaced by subsumed into depression:

We sat there, listening to appliances and other subtle noises of a house settling for the night, passing the half-pint. I told Tom about the kid chopping onions who couldn't take it. I told him about all the fools I'd seen who were smarter than you'd think because they were not letting their lives become constructs of what was expected of them. I felt like the polyester preacher and shut up. I'm not sure Tom understood me, and I'm certain that wasn't his fault. Perhaps I wasn't even speaking to the central causes of his depression. But it *looked* like he wasn't all fired up about living the life good-girl Elaine had cooked up for them. (132)

While Al ponders his friend's "depression," and even takes a quiet jab at Tom's wife ("good-girl"), this scene says more about Al than Tom. Framed in a quiet moment where they listen to the house "settling for the night," Al is anything *but* settled. He talks, then feels the falseness of what he's saying, indicated by the phrase "polyester preacher," a nod to famously bombastic televangelists, and stops talking. Male discourse has, once again, failed--Tom doesn't even seem to understand what Al is getting at. But what *is* Al getting at? What precisely does he fail to communicate? A page later, Al tells us: "I think we were both coming to the conclusion that we didn't know each other at all beyond the

slingshot lunacy” (133). What’s curious about this sentence is the final word, “lunacy,” which does more than simply characterize their old shenanigans shooting rats in their apartment with a high-powered slingshot. It reveals the nature of their homosocial interactions, and most of the homosocial interactions found in the book, and more importantly, it speaks to the nature of masculine discourse as a whole in the novel.

After Al concludes that he and Tom don’t know each other, a brief exchange takes place in which Al and Tom, for a brief moment, reconnect while discussing Fenster Ludge, their old department apparition. When Al suggests Tom make a room in the house for their old creation, Tom counters with the following: ““Or an *extra house!*”” (133); following Tom’s dialog, Al tells us: “Like that, he was restored, grinning openly at the prospect of Fenster’s alter-life beside his, I suppose” (133). Here again, the acquisition of property and objects (in this case a house) defines Fenster Ludge, the make-believe man who, at times, seems far more real than either Tom or Al. Ludge has upgraded from a name plate and books to a house and land, followed Tom from the halls of academia to the suburbs; his “alter-life” connotes Tom’s actual life and casts it as the very thing Ludge has always been: an inside joke. To recognize this is to be “restored,” for the “prospect” of the joke seems altogether more engaging and joyful to Tom than his actual circumstances. In grotesque terms, the “prospect” of Fenster Ludge is an ambivalent mockery of the banality of life to which Tom has surrendered and against which Al, if temporarily, avails himself. At the same time, it acknowledges that something about Fenster Ludge, the idea of the intangible man freed from the nominally traditional role of masculine breadwinner Tom has accepted, seems far more real and exciting, far more restorative (“restored”) than the reality either Tom or Al acknowledge.

Both realities—the tangible, real world and the intangible “prospect” of Fenster Ludge exist side by side, equally viable if only for the effects the latter has on the former.

In Bonaparte and Tom, Al finds tangible examples of the ways male discourse shaped by hegemonic social practices fails to communicate anything sane, much less of value. Al eventually snaps Tom out of his depression, but only by dredging up Fenster Ludge, the made-up man represented by the material objects of his trade (133).

Bonaparte, of course, isn't so lucky. Above and beyond failing to convey the nature of their subjective experiences, masculine discourse does little but reveal the fractured “lunacy” of masculine embodiment, a state of crisis in which men do not and cannot know each other, where the only thing that brings them remotely close to bonding is an allusion to an illusory other man. If true alterity in masculine identity is to be achieved, it's going to have to come from another direction. In this way, Powell's novel critiques masculinity not as a performative aspect of identity (though it is *also* that) but as an aspect of identity that has been performed on the body. As Moran notes when discussing the juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity in Powell's later works, his narratives suggest that “gender is a flexible, socially constructed performance” (118), one performed as much *upon* the body as by it.

Lost Marbles and the Masculine Feminine

Given that my reading of Powell's novel so far offers a vision of masculinity at odds with hegemonic masculinity, it may seem surprising that on the surface the ending of *Drown* reads like a capitulation to normative masculine stereotypes. Disillusioned at last from his incessant quitting, Al decides to return home and confront his father, the man who has long sought to convince Al to take over the family business. What that

confrontation entails, however, is anyone's guess; in typical Powellian ambiguity, Al arrives home without a plan other than to see his parents and decide his future. But the greeting he receives reveals that the homecoming is about much more than passing the family business from father to son:

My father and I have developed a greeting which seems to acknowledge this solemn loss: whether I'm back from a month or a year away, he stands, extends his hand not very far toward me, broadly opened to receive the handshake, rather like a catcher's mitt held close to the body; and as we shake, meeting with elbows bent in order to retain leverage should we decide to Indian-wrestle, and gripping each other harder than desperate salesmen who squeeze rubber balls in their sleep, he will say, "Hey bud." That seems to sum it all up neatly. You've lost *your* marbles, he said; I know, I gave the feeble things to you.

And you've lost *your* marbles, I squeeze back to him; I know, look how few you gave me.

We grin, not at each other but at the floor, departing from salesman's form. (137-138)

The passage places tremendous import on the male body in communication, in part to communicate what male discourse has failed to articulate: that they know not who and what they are, whether facsimiles of athletes as their hands approximate "catcher's mitt(s)" (again, the male body is defined by the objects meant to represent its intent and purpose), or "salesmen," purveyors of capitalism that, along with the handshake, are the familiar mastheads of the novel's brand of masculinity. The salesman is a working class figure distinct from those the novel has previously discussed, untethered to geography in a way fishermen and factory workers will never be, and free of the intellectual demands of graduate students (like Al) and academics. Nonetheless, they're no less vulnerable to the pressures faced by other categories of workers, driven to exert themselves ("squeeze rubber balls") even as they sleep. In comparing himself and his father to salesmen, Al acknowledges their distinction from, and innate similarity to, the lower-class workers that permeate the novel. But the "desperate" that precedes the

latter descriptor hints at the stakes of Al's and his father's handshake tug of war, one in which two make bodies connect in a struggle to "retain leverage," power. The passage of masculine capitalist power is a contest of wills, one in which the victor acquires the spoils, and one in which even the winner has partaken in what Al calls a "solemn loss."

Such contests, whether of will or strength or both, are common in hegemonic work cultures. Robin Ely and Michael Kimmel consider them integral components of the relationship between masculinity and capitalist enterprise, a relationship that preys on men's insecurities to coerce them into demonstrating their masculinity by participating in exploitative labor practices (629). By linking masculine worth to labor and production, masculine contest cultures--whether they take place in the office, the factory, or in this case the home--strengthen the bond between gender and labor; capitalist production is masculine identity. Michelle Chihara sees this linkage as a larger assertion of capitalist narratives, particularly in the 1980s (79). According to Chihara, these narratives worked to consolidate a schema of gender and class stratification that operate as a kind of cultural bildungsroman, one that traces economic success as the true cornerstone of identity, one in which plucky underdogs on the fringes of capitalist realism find ways to beat the system and join the ranks of successful (authentic in their capitalist endeavors and thus the consolidation of their subjective identities) entrepreneurs (87-88). Al isn't an underdog--recall that he can, at any time, elect to take over his father's business and inherit tremendous wealth--but he does exist, at his own volition, at the fringes of capitalist success. Steven Maynard argues that this capitalist success is often, though not always, coded as a "particular form of heterosexual masculinity," one that actively excludes, for example, women and queer-identified people (166). In his critique of

studies on traditionally male industries such as logging and mechanized industry, Maynard examines instances in which romantic same-sex interactions resulted in punitive, sometimes lethal purges of workplaces, and in doing so emphasizes how capitalism and hegemonic masculinity often collude to perpetuate oppressive matrixes of sexuality, gender, race, and class. This is the “leverage” at stake in the handshake between Al and his father, and if Al unconsciously exerts tremendous privilege in his failure (or unwillingness) to consider it as such, he nonetheless recognizes that what’s being brokered in the moment extends well beyond a simple greeting.

But what begins as a masculine contest of worth between Al and his father dovetails into admissions of what they lack. Here, in this grotesque moment of bodily reconfiguration in which two men become objects, Al’s father acknowledges the central issue, the thing for which they attempt to gain leverage over the other: the “marbles,” a pun for their brains, compares the male intellect to a children’s toy, outdated by decades at the time the novel was published. That Al has lost what his father gave to him indicates that *neither* man has his marbles, that both Al and his father, one the quitter of custodianship of the self, the other the custodian of everything the other quits, are masters of nothing, including themselves. They might participate in masculine contest culture, but it (along with the participants) is a hollow performance.

Unable to articulate this, Al and his father are reduced to talking in code:

He hands me a beer and we sit.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

This is code: Are you still wasting your life? Yes. (138)

Contextualized by the earlier admission that neither man has their marbles, the father’s question is rhetorical, reflexive, and applies just as much to himself as to Al. Despite

their markedly different trajectories, neither Al nor his father has escaped “wasting” their lives, and neither seems better equipped than the other to articulate precisely what has been lost, the “Nothing” that indicates total absence. The objective waste is, of course, Al’s failure to apply himself properly, an inability or unwillingness (or both) to take on normative obligations, expectations, and responsibilities, and a total disregard for the masculine contest culture that should--*should*--signify more than total cluelessness. At the same time, and particularly when contextualized by the novel’s association of the male body with objects, this also shows in material terms the “well of anxiety and fear” (Ely and Kimmell 632) that fuels masculine contest culture.

Rather than look at masculine contest culture as something restricted to the workplace (or, as we saw in Crews’s novel, the boxing ring), *Drown* reveals that such contest culture is widespread in male discourse and behavior; indeed, its place in the home, its embedding in familial interactions, and its aspect as the custodianship from which Al has been fleeing since the novel began only emphasizes how profoundly important it is to *all* aspects of masculine subjectivity. This is, of course, something neither Al nor his father can articulate, and what *Drown* shows us again and again is the failure of male discourse to articulate both the nature of the problem and its configuration in the male psyche. It falls instead to Al’s mother to establish the connection between gender and the consolidation of masculine identity:

To my father: “Your *son’s* got a meddling license.” She means, I think, to emphasize the *your* to saddle him with me, but in missing the emphasis she indicts my sex, she invokes the daughter she never was able to have, and so you cannot know finally if the emphasis is misplaced or simple badly timed. She does this curious emphasis often. (143)

Though Al correctly intuits that his gender is the central topic, he is all too willing to dismiss his mother's analysis. The word "emphasis," used four times in the passage, indicates the obvious importance of what is being said, and the frequency ("often") dispels what Al would prefer to believe--that the indictment of his sex is a mistake. Textually, nothing is emphasized more than "son's," italicized to stand out from the paragraph, and while the apostrophe grammatically serves to connect "son" to "has," it also adds the possessive tense to the subject of the sentence, Al, the son, and thus links the license to meddle (itself an analog to the futile masculine contest) to the performance of gender, the masculinity that contrasts the femininity of the absent "daughter." What Al's mother captures, then, is the sense of estrangement threaded throughout the novel, the pervasive sense (discernible to Al) that masculinity is constituted within a hegemony for specific purposes, not the least of which is the continued production of itself.

The indictment pronounced by Al's mother is, in the end, an indictment of gender, of masculinity, but it also allows readers to look at the contentious constructions of masculinity found in the novel through the lens of femininity. Estrangement, Deborah Martin reminds us, is a key factor in girlhood, a critical factor in the constitution of feminine subjectivity (135). According to Martin, young girls experience estrangement as a process, "one of self-estrangement and doubling, [which] can be seen as a privileged site of the uncanny . . . The uncanny, which ensues from a sense of self-estrangement, bears a strong connection to the sense of divided self-produced by the social and cultural imposition of femininity-passivity on the desiring or active self associated with the pre-adolescent girl" (136-137). While I don't claim that Al

experiences what young girls experience--his power and privilege as man prevents this--his pursuit of the "energy of activation" is a pursuit to find an alternative to the passivity he aligns with compliance to normative expectations. His experience of the world and its grotesque pairings is an experience with the uncanny, with a sense of comical estrangement from himself (and others) that makes clear his masculine-activeness (as opposed to Martin's "femininity-passivity") as a distinct and specific coordinate for the construction of gendered identity within hegemonic social practices. In other words, what Al pursues is less a substantive form of energy and more a substance-less quantification of the world and his relationship to it that allows him to perceive his own estrangement within the designated structure of that order. He wishes to see precisely how male bodies and minds are directed in accordance with dominant social practices, and to discern, clearly, how (or *if*) masculinity can be achieved in alterity.

To put it another way, Al's desire to quit is a desire to distance himself from dominant social practices *and* the meanings and obligations imparted from them onto his body. Al has just enough marbles to see the impingement of social practices on bodies, his included, but too few to articulate what his mother summed up in a sentence: Al might meddle, but his qualifications to do much more are nonexistent. The impingement, then, is an awareness made possible by the grotesque mode--grotesque for its commingling of the uncanny and the comic, and able to reveal (via discomfort and the ever-shifting relationships between the male body and the world around it) the world *as it is* and *as it seems to be*. In this sense, the narrative functions as a grotesque articulation wherein a subject acquires awareness of (him)self as subject *and* object, and failing to find potential alterity of subjective constitution, pivots toward a hegemonic

point of stability. Emancipation from hegemony was never a guarantee, and the ambivalent nature of the grotesque never promised otherwise; as Wolfgang Kayser notes when discussing twentieth century grotesque theater, “the division of the Self has become the guiding principle of characterization, and the notion of the unity of personality is completely abandoned” (135). This abandonment of unity, the acceptance of fragmentation, of contested incompatibles occupying the same psychic and material spaces, is the twentieth century grotesque, a mode that generates narrative and subjective change through discomfort. What Al experiences in the subject-object dialectic of the grotesque changes his perception of self unity, allowing him to see his masculinity as vulnerable to dismissal, as responsible for *and* helplessly ensnared within capitalist realism; his mother’s comment recalls Thompson when he claims that the “effect of the grotesque can best be summed up as alienation. Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing” (59).

With his own masculinity made “strange and disturbing,” Al returns to Knoxville to resume his study of inorganic chemistry before he takes over his father’s business. At least, that’s one way to read the last chapter--as a retreat. Another, equally viable reading is to view it as a man’s attempt to grapple one final time with the failure of male discourse, a struggle to articulate that which cannot be articulated. Al tells us:

On the way to Knoxville I considered the proper use of new utterance, its true relation, if any, to the formulations I have been borne along on. It seems now that new utterance is perhaps the linguistic equivalent of the kind of living that takes into account backward as well as forward motion. The maker of new utterance is taking a chance that he will not close the gap toward meaning, that he may in fact widen it, as the foolish living I’ve come to appreciate chances the same failure to advance and may indeed set one back. (153)

The “new utterance” refers to the “formulations” Al has “borne,” a pun that implies that the burden of articulation is as much linguistic as bodily, that a discourse of the grotesque is a discourse of subjectivity as experienced and felt *in the body*. As a “linguistic equivalent,” it attempts to convey in language grotesque articulation, the “forward” and “backward motion” along the unresolved (and unresolvable) poles of tension innate to the grotesque. The “foolish living” is in fact the “energy of activation” he has long sought, a desperate attempt to extricate himself from hegemonic social practices with masculinity intact.

Masculinity, then, is much more and much less than the primary protector of capitalist production and a performance of gender. It’s also a “failure to advance” toward anything other than itself, and if as I posit in the previous chapter, masculinity is a crisis of historical proportions, this failure is one of disastrous, critical dimensions. It is, in fact, a failure of grotesque proportions, one in which masculinity remains conscripted as capitalism’s protector, and in which capitalist realism is also masculine realism, a state in which alterity, the “energy of activation,” can only be conceived indirectly, as a function of the *failure* of male discourse. Al points this out mid-way through his final sketch: “High ambitions, bloated importance, normal *natural* opportunity (higher if you figure affirmative action)--they balance into an egregious, self-aggrandizing machine that eats people up. These modern whippets are climbing the ladder of success busting the rungs out” (165). All the “ambitions” and “importance,” elevated (“High”) or otherwise, amount to an “egregious, self-aggrandizing machine,” a clever and comical allusion to the capitalist rat race, the desperate and hungry system that binds men’s bodies and masculine identities to the task of perpetual reification, “eats” them up, and

leaves them behind. Masculine realism is precisely that, an acknowledgement that the “rungs” have been busted out, all the way up the ladder, by the “modern whippets” (here we recall Ray and his “detestable children of modernity” [Ray, 56]), other men who, much like Al, see no discernible path *out* save *up*. Masculine realism is an understanding about what men and masculinity mean for capitalism, a condition of being in which the failure of male discourse obscures the potential for alterity save through indirect exploration (in this case, the postmodern narrative frame of Al’s experiments).

Al’s “new utterance” represents the failure of language to identify and communicate the nature and shape of a reality that truly stands apart from what is otherwise apparent. In the closing moments of the novel, Al tells us that things were, to him, “clear and not clear,” a statement that reflects, among other things, the novel’s idea of masculinity. As Al, his father, Bonaparte, and the other men in the novel navigate the conflicting (and conflicted) realm of masculine identity, they become increasingly aware of the ways in which their manhood has been organized--ordained, in a sense--within the framework of hegemony, and if this burgeoning awareness fails to promise liberation or alterity (if indeed those are goals), the grotesque succeeds at provoking sufficient discomfort to explore the boundaries of traditional (normative) masculinities. Perhaps, in the best case, this helps to generate the space and energy necessary for emergent (and maybe divergent) masculinities to emerge, gender identities that men might construct *as a result* of navigating the contexts of hegemony. This is, some scholars argue, much more possible now than when Powell wrote and published his novel. In Brendan Gough’s 2018 book, *Contemporary Masculinities: Embodiment, Emotion, and*

Wellbeing, the author discusses the possibility for contemporary men and masculinities to explore new methods of consolidation and expression, particularly in ways that deviate from hegemonic ideals:

There now exists a range of new opportunities and challenges whereby men and boys might rethink their masculinity, perhaps making it easier in some instances to reject conventional norms . . . Because we live in a world where both conventional and emerging masculinity ideals are in play, building a masculine identity will inevitably involve manoeuvring between different and sometimes conflicting dimensions, trying to strike a balance that works within particular contexts. (11)

Al's experiment in quitting, his willingness to explore deviance and purposelessness is, I argue, an attempt to "strike a balance" between the life he lived and *something else*, a life free--or, at the very least, *apart* from--the masculine realism that is part and parcel of late stage capitalism. Viewed this way, Powell's novel attempts to answer the question Mark Fisher asked: "If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent, where can an effective challenge come from?" (20-21). By showing us how masculinities grapple with floundering male discourse, Powell's novel imagines a different sort of discourse, one that originates from *within* the condition of failure, probes its constituent parts, and attempts a quantifiable analysis. Al may not have all his marbles, and maybe not even *most* of them, but *A Woman Named Drown* has enough to take a shot, however unorthodox, at the bullseye.

Conclusion. Where Do We Go and How Do We Get There?

On January 6th, 2021, an insurrection took place at the United States Capitol. The short version is that protestors, spurred on by then-President Donald Trump, marched to the Capitol, breached the building, and attempted to halt Congressional proceedings meant to formalize the election of Joe Biden. That they were unsuccessful is obvious. Less obvious is what it meant and what it has to do with the chapters that precede this conclusion.

Robert Pape, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, describes the aforementioned protestors a “violent mob,” one intent on “an act of political violence.” He also sees the attempted insurrection as “the result of a large, diffuse and new kind of protest movement congealing in the United States” (Pape). While Pape identifies many characteristics of the mob, two stand out: the mob (not simply those later arrested) was “95 percent White and 85 percent male”. Annette John-Hall concurs, and makes a compelling argument that the insurrection was an act of white supremacy; she notes the presence of Confederate flags, shirts that bore the markings of Auschwitz, and the proliferation of racist and anti-Semitic branding, including a noose (John-Hall). Other outlets note similar patterns. Writing in *Ms. Magazine*, Jackson Katz describes the mob as “overwhelmingly white,” and notes that “[t]o anyone who has paid close attention to the regressive gender politics that underlies right-wing movements, the insurrection was an overt and violent assertion of white male centrality and entitlement.” Boston’s WBUR amplifies what other outlets report: the mob consisted largely of white, employed, mostly middle-aged men (Tong and McMahon). While great variety is to be found in class, occupation, and political disposition among

those who formed the mob, Tong and McMahon emphasize that “many insurrectionists came from counties that lost their white, non-Hispanic population.” The point I wish to make is one of demographics: The January 6th insurrection was initiated and carried out by angry white men.

The angry white men in question weren’t overwhelmingly Southern, but symbols of the South, and more precisely the Confederacy were, as previously noted, very much present. Three days after the insurrection, Maria Cramer drew attention to the Confederate Battle flag’s presence, calling it a “reminder of the persistence of white supremacy more than 150 years after the end of the Civil War” (*The New York Times*). Though the flag doesn’t necessarily connote the regional identification of the white insurrectionists, it is nonetheless a grim reminder that the spirit of the event has its roots in constructions of white masculinity not at all dissimilar from those deconstructed and analyzed in this study. That isn’t to say that the fictitious men and masculinities found in the novel’s I’ve examined correlate precisely to those present at the insurrection. Yes, Ray fantasizes about Confederate cavalry charges smashing into Yankee pickets, but his fantasies, cartoonishly comic in tone and proportions, dissolve by the novel’s end into muddy indetermination, a battleground not of historical reality, but of fantastical, grotesque possibility. As Ray himself puts it, “It is an open field” (109). Ray doesn’t yearn for a neo-Confederate America. Like Eugene Biggs and Al, he yearns instead for some stable sense of identity ensnared in antebellum romance and myth, because the reality is one handful of Nembutals from oblivion. Likewise, many of the individuals in the January 6th mob seemed eager to display the symbols of a mythic Confederate past, one in which the battle flag of Virginia represents a revolutionary

attack on what they perceive as electoral fraud and political injustice. In reality, theirs was a revolution of white supremacy; the stars and bars, the noose, the weapons, all of it hearkens back to a time when white men used violence to secure and protect their political and social power without repercussion.

What Eugene, Ray, and Al all face, then, is what the country faced on January 6th: a bold, grotesque image of white Southern masculinity. I don't use the term grotesque lightly; January 6th was a carnival of sorts. Many attendees dressed in elaborate costumes, some in tactical gear, ghillie suits, riot shields, helmets, and more than a few armed with clubs, batons, and, in one bizarre case, a spear. Vanessa Friedman claims the rioters "came dressed for chaos," and I'm inclined to agree (*The New York Times*). One man, Nathan Wayne Entrekin, dressed as a gladiator, helped storm the Capitol, then filmed a video greeting for his mother (Shepherd). Jacob Chansley, self-proclaimed "QAnon Shaman" and arguably the most recognizable rioter, arrived shirtless, adorned with a bison-horned fur helmet, and brandishing a spear wreathed with the American flag. Though he later recanted, Chansley's lawyer chalked up the man's behavior to being smitten with Trump, and claimed his client believed the former President "was fighting a cabal of Satan-worshipping, child sex trafficking cannibals" (qtd in Billeaud). Entrekin was arrested and faced criminal charges, and Chansley was sentenced to 41 months in prison. For these men, and for more than 500 other people charged by federal prosecutors for participating in the deadly riot, the carnival atmosphere was, despite their best efforts, temporary. But for a great many more people, the dread and revulsion unleashed on January 6th by a largely white male mob lingers on, perpetuated by intractable pockets of conservative resistance.

Perhaps men like Chansley and Entrekin are truly contrite. Perhaps, like Eugene, Ray, and Al, they suffer even as they inflict suffering on others. Trapped and pressured by conflicting, contradictory constructions of masculinity, beset by social practices that demand allegiance to socio-political paradigms in order to consolidate a normative masculine identity, they take up weapons and impromptu costumes, and go, for all intents and purposes to war to perform and embody masculinity. Eugene certainly does; he pummels other men, and when that is no longer a viable way to both make a living and embody a masculine identity, he pummels himself. Ray loses himself in sex, music, and fantasies of a mythic Southern past as tenuous as his grip on reality, and when not engaged thusly, he considers suicide and watches other men murder those he loves. It can hardly be said that Al suffers as Eugene and Ray suffers, nor does he seem as willing as his contemporaries to inflict suffering on others. Instead, Al quits. He abdicates all positions, and when no one steps up to fill the masculine void, he returns, takes up the mantle of his father's business, sets out to finish his Ph.D., and sets out to *be* what he has, until that point, refused to be: the bread-winning white man in every sense of the word. *A Woman Named Drown* reveals the hopelessly entanglement between masculinity and capitalism, and offers its protagonist a knot that cannot be solved. What we learn from Al's quitting is what he too learns: Alterity is possible but far from guaranteed, and for many men, extremely unlikely.

The few thousand rioters who stormed the Capitol on January 6th, much less the hundreds charged with crimes in the aftermath, are not necessarily representative of white Southern men, but their violent brand of masculinity displayed during the insurrection is a little too on-brand with the more destructive examples covered in this

study. And just as this extends far beyond the novels discussed in previous chapters, it also extends beyond the events of January 6th. White men similar to the protagonists of the novels examined in this study are targeted far less frequently than other populations. Eight months after the attempted insurrection, the FBI published data on hate crime statistics for the previous year (2020) that paints a terrifying picture: Racially motivated hate crime accounts for more than 61% of reported hate crimes, and 55% of the reported offenders in the Bureau's Unified Crime Reporting Program are classified as white (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Consider also the tremendous overlap between male violence and sexual assault. The National Sexual Violence Research Center reports that one in five women in the U.S. experience "completed or attempted rape during their lifetime," and 81% of women nationwide report sexual harassment or assault in some form (NSVRC). Violence against Trans communities, and particularly against Trans women soared in 2020 and 2021 such that *Time Magazine* called 2021 "the deadliest year for transgender and gender non-conforming people in the U.S. on record" (*Time*). Violence against Trans communities disproportionately affects transgender women of color, especially "Black and Latinx transgender women," and very often, transgender women of color are killed by "acquaintances, partners or strangers" (Human Rights Campaign).

The soaring rates of anti-trans violence and hate crime reporting correlates to increased levels of white supremacist activity. The Anti-Defamation League reports all-time high levels of white supremacist propaganda in 2020, double the reported incidents in 2019 (ADL). The Brookings Institution compounds this, pointing out that the white supremacy has long been an intrinsic characteristic of American law enforcement

agencies (Brookings). The link between white masculinity, Southern or otherwise, and violence and domination is beyond dispute. Men may be trapped in binary systems of gender conformity, subjected to all manner of cruel and confining social practices, but that pales in comparison to the brutality they heap upon other, more socially, politically, and economically vulnerable populations. The point, then, is stark, simple, and awful: The many dangers posed to white men are dwarfed by the innumerable threats to the lives of those who *aren't* white and male.

This begs the question: What drives these surges in violence against vulnerable populations? Casey Ryan Kelly argues that hegemonic white masculinity often requires performing compensatory, hyper-masculine identification to withstand critiques that, ironically, attempt to emasculate the male figure through homophobic, anti-feminist representations in media that “reify the very thing the artists wish to expose” (21). In other words, critiques against hegemonic masculinity sometimes adopt the same homophobic, anti-feminist rhetoric that simultaneously reifies the target. Similar to Eugene Biggs’s performances, hegemonic white masculinity performs itself as a way of combating criticism and strengthening its position as a dominant gender identity, and these performances have real-life consequences; in true carnivalesque fashion, the violence deployed by those performing hegemonic white masculinity refuses to distinguish between spectator and performer, and the results, as noted above, can be deadly. Annie Kelly identifies the rise of the alt-right and its brand of white nationalism as the logical consequence of mainstream neo-conservatism and frames their central concern as “a discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity, which is seen as being artificially but powerfully ‘degenerated’” (69). Some of this perceived

“degeneration” may be rooted in the relationship between men, labor, and class. In their study on the relationship between masculine violence and social class, Rachel Jewkes and Robert Morrell conclude that anxiety over poverty, men’s places in stratified institutions of commerce, and public perception of their class correlates to some instances of violence against women, children, and non-conforming (non-hegemonic) men (565). Jewkes and Morrell posit their research as a basis for increased anti-poverty policy (among other things) and warn of the need to “move away from essentialist research” that fails to consider a plurality of complicated, often overlapping masculinities as opposed to a singular gender identity (566). Their argument seems more salient than ever. Rather than think of hegemonic white masculinity as a unified construction, it may be far more prudent and productive to view it—if an “it” must be articulated in the singular tense—as a convergence point of anxieties (the “crises” discussed in this study), social practices, traditions, cultures, and so forth. Hegemonic masculinities may be as numerous as the people who embody them, and as difficult to dispel as their most vocal political proponents.

My point in recounting these events and statistics is to emphasize the critical need to study and understand how white masculinity is constructed at social, political, and personal levels, particularly with regards to how these intersect, influence, and are in turn influenced by social practices. Though this study emphasizes literature as a way of conducting such an analysis, by no means is that the sole, nor even necessarily the best, most efficient way to put white masculinity under the microscope. Nonetheless, I believe that depictions of white Southern masculinity in literature reveal a great deal about cultural attitudes towards its embodiment in real-life analogues, and more

importantly, afford unique opportunities to imagine alterity in the form of traumatized, contradictory, and purposeless constructions of masculine identity. Given the prior discussion of January 6th (not to mention the innumerable intersecting instances of male-perpetrated violence not exhaustively covered here), I cannot stress enough the need to more fully conceptualize alternative constructions of masculine identity in literature and in reality. As this study shows, white hegemonic masculinities are not, and have never been, as stable as they may have sought to appear. Even in works obsessed with masculinity, works myopically focused on the male body and its effects, there are nodes of alterity, moments when fissures form in dominant gender constructs, moments to which we must pay attention, moments we absolutely need to further explore. What Eugene, Ray, and AI show us is the *potential* for alterity, but that potential, underscored in these texts by the ambivalence of the grotesque, is never guaranteed.

One may object to the use of “we” above; one could argue that the onus is on white men to fix the problems they’ve created, and I couldn’t agree more. But as Lily Zhen points out, the historical and contemporary positions of privilege enjoyed by white men often obstruct diversity and inclusion, and often lead to “defensive” opposition (*Harvard Business Review*). Men often fail to see, willfully or otherwise, that they embody a dominant form of masculinity, a specific identity distinct from, and considerably more privileged than, other identities; efforts to make this contradiction clear are, Zhen argues, crucial to “make leaders into allies, not enemies” (*Harvard Business Review*). Here again we see the intersection of social and economic forces on the construction of identity; likewise, we see how bodies in turn shape social practices,

as according to Colin Chapell the need to distinguish a regional identity amid the economic recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s led to an emphasis on deviancy (197). In what can rightly be called an era of cultural whiplash, portrayals of Southern identity in popular media alternately embraced and rejected stereotypes of deviancy, grotesqueness, and abjection (Chapell 197-198). Implicit in my arguments throughout this study is the idea that representations of white Southern masculinity in popular media fail to fully (or sometimes remotely) align with de facto models of hegemonic masculinity; often, such as with Eugene Biggs, they find themselves in direct conflict with the oppressive social practices that perpetuate violent trauma on the bodies of men and women alike; at times, such as with Ray, the contradictions inherent in dominant gender models lead to subjective disjunction, a fragmentation of identity that leads, ultimately, to narrative and psychological disintegration. The masculinities embodied in these novels are, from the perspective of hegemony, pale and flawed imitations; in the case of Al, protected by his father's economic legacy, masculinity is a cold, clinical embodiment of public and personal scrutiny, an eye that looks within and without to affirm or deny its own deficiencies. The onus *is* on white men to fix their problems, and these novels, whether deliberately or not, contribute to that larger project.

Critical Whiteness, the Grotesque, and Further Studies

It's important to name that aforementioned larger cultural project and contextualize it within and beyond the framework of this study. Written in 2009, Chapell's critique of Southern male deviancy may now be seen as part of what other scholars, such as Stephany Rose, collectively call "critical whiteness studies," a theoretical lens concerned with the "dismantling of racist ideologies built upon notions of

white supremacy” (5). More recently, critical attention has incorporated critical whiteness and masculinity studies with those of the monstrous, the uncanny, and the grotesque. Kyle Christensen, for example, coins the term “monstrous man boy” to describe a specific prominent character found throughout contemporary horror media. The “monstrous man boy is, according to Christensen, “villainous and almost always white,” an individual who “despite being of adult age, lives in a perpetual childhood state, engaging in petulant and immature behaviors that often have violent consequences” (88). Christensen argues that monstrous man boys are embodiments of the contemporary uncanny, bodies that gesture to a repressed, potentially traumatic past, and deploy their immaturity to generate sympathy and redirect blame for their creation onto women, minorities, and other historically oppressed populations. It should be no surprise that Christensen locates real-world analogues for the monstrous man boy in many of the January 6th rioters (106). For many people, myself included, that day was a contemporary horror, one whose carnival atmosphere of terror emphasizes the grotesque social and political realities of the current era. Largely white, the monstrous man boys of January 6th are vivid warnings that whiteness and masculinity must not only be studied, but decentered from dominant positions of social, political, and economic power.

It is fitting, then, that the grotesque mode provides a powerful, if ambivalent, tool for addressing such warnings. A key goal of this study is to consider anew the grotesque and to make clearer distinctions between its deployments in media. Like Ib Johansen, I argue that critical consideration of grotesque mode is relevant to more than literature, film, and other forms of media; it is, unlike the fantastic, a form “imbued with

subcultural impulses or elements” that lend it a malleability beyond the fantastic, the Gothic, and the surreal, particularly in our contemporary postmodern context (13). Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque aspect of the grotesque as a “crossroads,” a “junction” where disparate social, political, and personal social practices (“systems” in Bakhtin’s terms) overlap and penetrate each other’s boundaries (386). The grotesque in postmodernity represent a “crossroads,” but I want to emphasize the theoretical value in seeing the grotesque in two relevant ways: In its ambivalence, the grotesque functions as a conceptual crossroads, the cognitive site where ideas on the nature of reality cross over one another, but also as the means of transmission, the modal force by which the aforementioned ideas and concepts traverse this junction point and find new relevance.

Applied to the interrogation of masculinity, the grotesque is most relevant as a tool of disruption, a magnifying glass capable of exposing not just the flaws but the reasons such flaws exist in dominant constructions of gender. The grotesque disrupts absolutism, even if only temporarily; consider Lee Quinby’s examination of the link between Christian fundamentalism and masculinity, what he calls “apocalyptic masculinity” or “millennialist manhood,” a gender construct polarized between “a victimized elect and an odious enemy” (82). While the texts considered in this study rarely consider religion a worthwhile endeavor, they are nonetheless obsessed with matters of life and death, with the possibility of masculine redemption and the nearness of total subjective—and in Eugene’s and Ray’s cases, physical—annihilation. What is significant about the borderline apocalyptic visions of these novels with regards to masculine identity, and how might the grotesque assist in such an inquiry? How can the grotesque and its emphasis on life, death, and rebirth help us better understand the

polarization of masculinities in postmodernity, in media and culture, in fiction and the real world?

In response to changing social, cultural, political, and economic attitudes about men's place in society, Michael Kimmell notes men "seem uncomfortable in that new spotlight, shifting uncomfortably, shielding their eyes, even railing against the glare" (2). Discomfort is the language of the grotesque, and much as I've attempted to argue for a new understanding of masculinities as traumatic crises of historical proportions floundering against the indeterminacy of postmodernity, the need for continued critical examination of men and masculinities (though not exclusively via men's bodies and effects) remains strong. January 6th is a grim reminder of the need to further examine white masculinities, to probe at the conceptual scaffolding by which white men consolidate and deploy power in social practices, and to explore alterity in masculine identity in order to conduct what I argue is, ultimately, necessary: a great decentering of men, men's bodies, whiteness, masculinities, and hegemony from each other. If we wish to avoid another January 6th, if we wish to defuse the rhetoric that props up narratives of gender essentialism and its related political positions, this decentering cannot, must not, be not purely theoretical, not relegated to abstraction; it must be considered from the vantage point of social practices as they impact bodies, and from the viewpoint of bodies as they impact social practices.

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