

Harry Crews's *Body* and the Politics of Eugenics

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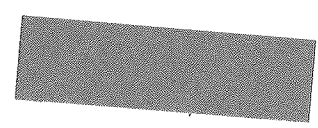
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Abstract

It is my contention that Crews's *Body* reveals the complexities and contradictions of the female bodybuilding subculture. This examination seeks to explore the contradictions within female bodybuilding as it functions as a eugenic subculture. Crews's presentation of the female bodybuilding subculture reveals the eugenic nature of the sport. The primary dialogue that ultimately pushes this to the forefront is, of course, centered around main character Dorothy Turnipseed turned female bodybuilder, Shereel Dupont, and her primary competitor in the Ms. Cosmos competition, Marvella Washington. When examining the female bodybuilding subculture presented within *Body* through the characters of Shereel and Marvella it becomes clear that any sense of empowerment is coupled with exploitation and manipulation. Shereel's complacency with trainer, Russell "Muscle" Morgan, disavows any notion that bodybuilding will be an agency for empowerment for her character. Simultaneously, Marvella's complacency with trainer, Wallace "The Wall" Wilson, deconstructs any notions that bodybuilding will be any more empowering for her character either. Marvella demonstrates complacency within the patriarchal relationship that she has with her trainer, Wallace Wilson. Marvella does so by embracing Wallace's chemical enhancement of her body. The ultimate question answered at the novel's close is who will win the competition. Despite Price's analysis that the novel's conclusion is a showdown between face queen Shereel and monster Marvella, the eugenic-based female bodybuilding subculture is more complex. The showdown, at the novel's closing, however, is indicative of a showdown between two differing forms of eugenics. Shereel, it seems, represents a body that complies with traditional eugenics while Marvella represents a body aligned with modern eugenics.

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Introduction

Harry Crews's *Body* (1990) details the story of Dorothy Turnipseed who transforms her body through bodybuilding. In *Body*, main character, Shereel Dupont (formerly a Grit named Dorothy Turnipseed), leaves her rural home in Waycross, Georgia to apply for a secretarial position at Russell Morgan Morgan's Emporium of Pain. Once there, however, Turnipseed finds herself being, literally, examined by Russell Morgan—not for the secretarial position, but to become a bodybuilder. The novel is set at the Blue Flamingo Hotel in Miami, Florida where Turnipseed, now known as Shereel Dupont, will compete in the fictitious Ms. Cosmos bodybuilding competition. Shereel's two worlds collide when her family, the Turnipseeds, travel from Waycross and unexpectedly arrive at the Blue Flamingo to support her in the bodybuilding competition. While the Turnipseeds represent the poor white Grit background that Shereel has abandoned, bodybuilding appears to represent a world in which competitors—regardless of origins—are literally and figuratively placed on the same platform and judged wholly on body.

Body, Crews's eleventh novel, among many other things, further demonstrates Crews's ability to articulate the Grit experience. Crews is able to articulate the desperation of poor whites by simply having first-hand knowledge of such desperation. Crews has written that,

The world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it. It was a world in which survival

depended on raw courage, a courage born out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives. (*A Childhood* 44)

For Crews, poor whites, or Grits as he calls them, are the epitome of survival. Crews is able to articulate the Grit experience because his subject is indeed “his” people.

Subsequently, the distance between author and subject is dissolved as are the stereotypes that plagued the portrayals of his literary predecessors.¹ Frank W. Shelton has stated that Harry Crews, in particular, is “absolutely unique among Southern writers in that he writes about life from the perspective of the poor white” (qtd. in McGregory 66). Harry Crews’s ability, as Wendy P. Miller states in “‘Right now body is everything’: Harry Crews’s Representations of Poor-White Culture in *Body*,” to write “with authority as an insider, demonstrating both introspection and poignancy” is an important distinction between Crews and literary predecessors (13). *Body* further demonstrates Crews’s ability to reject the previous cultural productions of poor whites.

Still, beyond Crews’s ability to dismantle the stereotypes of poor whites by literary predecessors, *Body* has garnered little critical dialogue. To date, extended critical analyses of the novel are extremely limited. Miller’s examination of the poor-white culture within the novel, Stephen Want’s Marxist analysis, and Andrew Price’s examination of monstrosity and transgression explore the novel in its entirety. In “The (Over)Exposed Body: Harry Crews’s *Body*,” Stephen Want’s “analysis concentrate[s] on how Crews uses the elasticity and ambiguities available in fiction to reveal the body in certain extreme forms of control, and the way body and mind react to the subjection that

¹ See also Shields McIlwaine’s *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (1970), Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Poor White in Fiction* (1976), and Susan Currell’s and Christina Cogdell’s *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (2003).

control entail[s]" (156). For Want, this assertion is exemplified most aptly in *Body* because "the body is never neutral" but instead culturally defined (156). Want's examination of body in *Body* is led by several important assertions. The first of these is the assertion that the "never neutral" bodies constructed in the novel are the result of patriarchal exertion characterized by male obsession with female reproductive abilities. Want's examination then focuses on the disciplining of the body utilizing a Marxist approach to illustrate the laborious nature of body building training and the commodification of body amid the capitalist bodybuilding subculture, the American South, and America at large. A second analysis, Andrew Price's "'Monsters and 'Face Queens' in Harry Crews's *Body*" also provides critical dialogue about *Body* as it confronts the ideas of monstrosity and transgression in the novel. For Price, Crews's own ideological lamentation is expressed in the novel when transgressive and monstrous Marvella Washington wins the Ms. Cosmos competition instead of face queen Shereel Dupont. Price's analysis here builds upon the framework of Leslie Heywood and integrates Crews's *Body* as a cultural artifact in the current debate surrounding female bodybuilding. Want and Price both examine the exposure of the body within *Body*; however, I believe that Crews's exposure and treatment of the female bodybuilder's body within the novel is far more complex and laden with contradictions than both analyses present.

It is my contention that Crews's *Body* reveals the complexities and contradictions of the female bodybuilding subculture. This examination seeks to explore the contradictions within female bodybuilding as it functions as a eugenic subculture. Crews's presentation of the female bodybuilding subculture reveals the eugenic nature of

the sport. The primary dialogue that ultimately pushes this to the forefront is, of course, centered around main character, female bodybuilder Shereel Dupont, and her primary competitor in the Ms. Cosmos competition, Marvella Washington. When examining the female bodybuilding subculture presented within *Body* through the characters of Shereel and Marvella it becomes clear that any sense of empowerment is coupled with exploitation and manipulation. Shereel's complacency with trainer, Russell Morgan disavows any notion that bodybuilding will be an agency for empowerment for her character. Simultaneously, Marvella's complacency with trainer, Wallace Wilson deconstructs any notions that bodybuilding will be any more empowering for her character either. Marvella demonstrates complacency within the patriarchal relationship that she has with her trainer, Wallace. Marvella does so by embracing Wallace's chemical enhancement of her body. Throughout the novel, the ultimate question answered at the novel's close is who will win the competition. Despite Price's analysis that the novel's conclusion is a showdown between face queen Shereel Dupont and monster Marvella Washington, the eugenic female bodybuilding subculture is more complex. The showdown, at the novel's closing, however, is indicative of a showdown between two differing forms of eugenics. Shereel, it seems, represents a body that complies with traditional eugenics while Marvella represents a body aligned with modern eugenics.

Ultimately, it is Marvella that wins the Ms. Cosmos title and Shereel commits suicide. Marvella differs very little from main character Sheerel. Shereel accepts Russell Morgan as god, trainer, patriarchal figure just as Marvella demonstrates little resistance from the partriarchal influence of her trainer, Wallace Wilson. Shereel's suicide, at the

novel's close, becomes the manner through which she ultimately attains autonomy, free of the contradictions of the female bodybuilding subculture that has subjugated her. While Marvella's body demonstrates a blurring of the binary system of gender, Marvella's victory is less victorious and does not produce the autonomy it might seem to represent. Instead, Marvella Washington remains dangerously commodified and a victim of modern eugenics.

Primary Responses to Female Bodybuilding

Because the female bodybuilding subculture in *Body* is so evocative, critical dialogue concerning the novel has taken the form of one of three primary responses to female bodybuilding. While Want and Price emphasize the exploitative nature of female bodybuilding, Lake, Romine, and Miller view female bodybuilding as an agency of empowerment. Pamela L. Moore, in "Feminist Bodybuilding, Sex, and the Interruption of Investigative Knowledge," has aptly explained that there are three primary responses to female bodybuilding. Moore articulates that,

Presented with the built female body, feminists have generally made one of three responses [to female bodybuilding/bodybuilders]. The first is skeptical. This response understands female bodybuilding as an emulation of male standards. . . . A second response places female bodybuilding in a category with exploitations or manipulations of female bodies. Like the anorexic, the female bodybuilder is driven by self-discipline and a distorted body image to unnatural extremes, including the abuse of steroids and diuretics. . . . A third response is purely celebratory. Women

are finally achieving the right to manipulate their bodies however they choose. (*Building Bodies* 74-75)

While Want's Marxist approach to the novel and Price's determination that Shereel represents a face queen who adheres to the heterosexist desires of trainer Russell reveal the exploitation and manipulation of the female body, other critics have asserted quite the opposite response. In "Women in the Novels of Harry Crews," Elise S. Lake states, "Although Shereel wins her weight class, she loses the overall competition to Marvella. Shereel's independence ends with the competition" (62). For Lake, it seems, Shereel's autonomy ends with her loss of the Ms. Cosmos competition. Furthermore, Scott Romine, in "Harry Crews's Away Games: Home and Sport in *A Feast of Snakes* and *Body*" states that, "losing does not mean merely the loss of endorsements, but the loss of identity, the true stake of the game" (82). For Romine, Shereel's inability to successfully win the competition and integrate herself into the game coupled with her alienation from her poor white heritage leads to the conclusion that had Shereel won the competition her autonomy would have remained intact as would her identity. Still both Lake and Romine, while celebrating bodybuilding as an agency of empowerment, perhaps inadvertently, undermine their respective celebratory responses to Shereel as female bodybuilder by establishing the association between victory in the Ms. Cosmos competition with autonomy. Additionally, Miller has stated that "Shereel seeks approval and affirmation of her own self-worth through bodybuilding" (17). In sharp contrast to Lake and Romine, however, bodybuilding for Shereel is an agency through which to terminate her poor-white origins. Bodybuilding, for Miller, is such a powerful agency in Shereel's life, that her loss of the Ms. Cosmos competition, causes "[her] justification for

her own existence [to] dissolve" (17). For Miller, however, bodybuilding as an agency, is tenuous because it further illustrates her inability to reconcile her poor-white Grit identity.

In *Body*, Crews leads readers to believe that bodybuilding is a source of empowerment for the women who ritualistically build their bodies. At one point, *Body* reads, "It was only when [Shereel] came together with the mysterious others, all of them coming from far cities, to stand nearly naked in front of a thundering audience—it was only then that [Shereel] fully realized what it was to be special, special in her blood and flesh and sweat and most of all her pain" (12). Similarly, Leslie Heywood, the author of *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's BodyBuilding*, has asserted that female bodybuilding serves a manner through which women exonerate personal insecurities, break free of victim status, and secure autonomy from the hegemonic views expressed in dominant society. Heywood, further, articulates that "bodybuilding can be an active part of self-realization" (135). Lake and Romine echo this sentiment in their respective assertions of autonomy and independence that Shereel has obtained through bodybuilding. For Romine, in particular, losing the Ms. Cosmos competition is the "loss of identity" for Shereel (82). Despite Lake's and Romine's assertions, however, and *Body*'s narrator's stance, close examination of the novel reveals that female bodybuilding is not an agency of empowerment for Shereel or Marvella. Furthermore, while bodybuilding does sever Shereel's poor white origins, the novel more aptly reveals that both Shereel Dupont and Marvella Washington are constructed bodies produced under the eugenic-based patriarchal control and directives of their respective trainers.

Regardless of their dramatic bodily transformations, the primary female bodybuilders in the novel, Shereel Dupont and Marvella Washington, do not exhibit “the right to manipulate [her] bod[y] however [she] choose[s]” (Moore 75). The celebratory or liberatory responses of Lake and Romine are rejected as Shereel and Marvella find themselves under the patriarchal control of trainers Russell Morgan and Wallace Wilson, who dictate dietary restrictions, extreme training regimes, anabolic steroid usage, and practices of segregation. For these reasons, Price’s analysis of the novel asserts that Shereel is simply a face queen, a female bodybuilder who reinforces rather than resists the hegemony of the dominant society which includes, but is not limited to, heterosexist desirability. In *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women’s Sports*, Jennifer Hargreaves writes that,

In the case of female body-building idealized femininity and sexuality are *prior to* and become *more significant* than muscularity and athleticism.

Furthermore the tremendous growth of the sport over the last decade has been mediated by male-defined standards of femininity. . . . The notion of a feminine shape implies narrow alternatives. The diversities of images of female sexualization in sports and their apparent liberative tendencies are limited by the privileging of a powerful heterosexual code. (Hargreaves 169)

According to Hargreaves, the celebratory or liberatory view of female bodybuilding is gravely limited by the female bodybuilders’ inability to break free of the privileged and dominant heterosexual matrix. Furthermore, Want observes that, “the discipline to which [Shereel and Marvella] subject themselves is extended from a patriarchal culture and

organized within bodybuilding specifically by male trainers” (158). Instead, of choosing to manipulate their bodies how they choose to, the female bodybuilders in the novel are “intensely marked by [their trainers’] private obsession[s]” their own ideological construction of the aesthetically perfect female body (Greenblatt vii). While Shereel may indeed feel special as she stands bikini-clad on the competition stage, she does little to secure her autonomy from Russell’s patriarchal influence. Similarly, Marvella’s constructed body, while defying the cultural signifiers of femininity, demonstrates her compliance with Wallace’s eugenic-based patriarchy.

Female Bodybuilding as a Eugenic Subculture

The female bodybuilding subculture, eugenic in nature, rests on the foundation that physical perfection is attainable. At the Blue Flamingo Hotel in Miami, Florida where the Mr. and Ms. Cosmos contest will take place, the narrator states,

Everybody seemed perfect of his kind, teeth incredibly white, hair thick and wildly beautiful, eyes clear and shining with a kind of mindless confidence, as though the world would never die, could never die. Age and death seemed defeated here. They all conspicuously ignored one another as they moved in the contained monuments they had made of themselves. Their skins circumscribed their worlds, worlds they inhabited with obvious joy, contentment and pride. (*Body* 17)

The bodybuilders in the novel are presented as seemingly perfect specimens of the body at the height of physical perfection. They are described as “monuments” whose chiseled bodies result in their “obvious joy, contentment, and pride” (17). Shereel’s body of

muscles is described as being “sharply layered and defined as if they had been etched with acid” (11). Shereel and Marvella, along with the other bodybuilders, have become the physical epitome of perfection.

This idea of achieving physical perfection, however, becomes a modern-day form of eugenics. Eugenics, as a movement, began in the late nineteenth century.² According to Francis J. Galton, a British scientist and father of modern eugenics, “eugenics [was] the study of all of the agencies under social control which may improve or impair the inborn qualities of future generations of man, either physically or mentally” (Newman 441). The eugenics movement, broadly defined, sought to breed a superior American race (specifically, one of Nordic descent) while simultaneously “methodically terminat[ing] all the racial and ethnic groups, and social classes, they disliked or feared” (Black 7). Put another way, eugenicists sought to terminate the socio-economic and ethno-racial groups that they viewed as inferior while simultaneously breeding and rewarding the procreation of the eugenically superior. The ultimate goal of eugenics was to breed a perfected superhuman race both mentally and physically and to eliminate all those deemed as degenerates.

A manifestation of the eugenicist agenda was what were known as Fitter Families for Future Firesides, or Fitter Families Contests, that were conducted at state-wide fairs around the United States. In the Fitter Families Contests, contestants would submit a completed family pedigree chart that described the physical as well as mental

² The following material is compiled from Edwin Black’s *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (2003), Susan Currell’s and Christina Cogdell’s *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (2006), Daniel Kelves’ *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1985), Wendy Kline’s *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (2005), and Edward J. Larson’s *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (1995).

characteristics of each member of the family. Additionally, each member of the families would undergo several physical and psychological examinations. Families who scored the highest of the contestants would be awarded trophies, while those families who scored a grade of B+ or better were awarded medallions, the bronze inscribed with the phrase, "Yea I have a goodly heritage."³

At the very essence of the bodybuilding competitions, as with the Fitter Families Contests, is the belief that the good "genetics" inform what the body itself illustrates. For bodybuilding, as a eugenic subculture, there is an overarching belief that genetics can and will both limit and increase the possibility of acquiring a superior physique. Without the right genetics, perfect symmetry can never be achieved and the acquisition of ripped muscularity is limited by the genetic inferiority of poor skin that prohibits the loss of the subcutaneous layer of fat beneath the epidermis. In "From Abject to Object: Women's Bodybuilding" Marcia Ian contends that "this fantasy of, and reverence for, superior "genetics" is certainly one of bodybuilding's several Nazi-esque qualities. Others include a kind of superrace (not just superhero) mentality. . ." (12). Good genetics, it seems, allow bodybuilders to build their muscles and create a superior physical form. The beginning of bodybuilding is good genetics, genetics that allow one to become perfectly symmetrical and proportioned. Good genetics, it seems, produce a lean ripped body that is indicative of a "goodly" foundation.

The presentation of the female bodybuilding subculture in *Body* as eugenic in nature allows Crews to accomplish two significant goals. First, because it is a eugenic subculture, as previously mentioned, Crews is able to successfully reject previous literary

³ See David Micklos and Jan Witkowski for more information on Fitter Family Contests and their relationship with eugenics.

and cultural productions of both poor whites and African-Americans. In this way, Crews is able to present poor white, Shereel, and African American, Marvella, as, ironically, genetically superior. Crews is able to counter eugenic ideology and rhetoric of literary predecessors by composing two characters, who, in previous literary productions would have been considered innately degenerate, as genetically predisposed to aesthetic perfection.

Within the novel African American Marvella and poor white Dorothy are both presented as genetically predisposed to building perfect bodies. Marvella is described as a "monument" (45). Marvella's beautifully and dangerously perfect sculpted body is indicative of good genetics at the core and secondly by chemical engineering and extreme discipline. Prior to her transformation into Shereel Dupont, Dorothy is commended by Russell for her superior bone structure and genetics. Russell tells Dorothy "You've got great bones" and that "[She] fell into a great gene pool" (23). Russell, further, reiterates how this will positively impact her ability to become a bodybuilder. Russell tells Dorothy that, "You can do anything with *anything* in a weight gymnasium. Except bones. Bone configuration is something that can't be touched. You've either got bones or you don't. You've got 'em. Bones like yours come along every decade or so" (23). Russell's assertion is that Dorothy is genetically predisposed to superior physicality not only reveals the core belief of the eugenic bodybuilding subculture, but also rejects the eugenic notion that individuals from lower socio-economic groups could possibly exhibit physical superiority.

Second, as a eugenic subculture, Crews is able to explore the ways in which the two respective trainers, Russell Morgan and Wallace Wilson, exert patriarchal control

amid the eugenic-based desire to build a superrace. For Russell, his desire to construct Shereel as the muscled while feminine bodybuilder is capitalistic as well as eugenic-based. Wallace's desire to build a chemically-engineered Marvella without the cultural signifiers of femininity is also capitalistic and eugenic. The showdown, at the novel's close, represents, however, a showdown between two differing forms of eugenics. While Shereel represents traditional eugenics, Marvella represents modern eugenics. The patriarchal construction of Shereel and Marvella allows Crews, in the larger eugenic context, to explore the ways in which these two patriarchal capitalist versions of eugenics compete throughout the novel.

Patriarchal Control in *Body*

In their eugenic-based desires to create female bodybuilders at the height of aesthetic perfection, the trainers exert a great deal of patriarchal control. While the bodybuilders train and diet to build bodies of physical perfection, they do so under the patriarchy of their trainers. The patriarchal relationships between the trainers and the female bodybuilders within the novel is "intensely marked" by the trainers' own aspirations to build, what they each define, as the perfect female body (Greenblatt vii).

The pattern of patriarchal control in the relationship between Shereel Dupont and trainer Russell Morgan in *Body* demonstrates one of the ways in which the main character appears to actively comply with the patriarchy of the dominant society. This patriarchal control is evident from the beginning of Dorothy's relationship with Russell. Throughout the novel, Dorothy provides little indication that she even desires to become a bodybuilder. In fact, the novel states "[Dorothy] was fascinated by the women in the

gym. . . . But she never once considered working out herself until Russell walked into the office and did not so much ask as demand that that she bring a leotard the next day for a workout" (22). While Dorothy's fascination with the women is interesting, it is clear that she does not see herself as one of the women sweating and grunting alongside the men. Russell's request that Dorothy come to work the following day in a leotard leads to "an examination" (23). The examination between the two occurs when Dorothy—who will later become Shereel Dupont—is working as a secretary at Russell Morgan Morgan's Emporium of Pain. *Body* reads,

Since she wanted to keep her job, she appeared in the leotard the next day, powder blue, skintight thing that made her feel naked when she stepped out of the women's dressing room. Russell Morgan came to stand in front of her and she did not know what to say or do as he examined her. That's the way she thought of it, an examination. He took her by the shoulder and turned her. He felt the alignment of her spine, he stared hard and long at her legs, her arms, the way her pelvis tilted. It took only two or three minutes, but felt like an hour, and she blushed the entire time although that seemed to be the only thing about her that Russell Morgan did not notice. (22-23)

Dorothy wants to keep her job and she realizes that the only way to do so is to subject herself to objectification. Dorothy must be willing to become the object of Russell's gaze in an effort to maintain her occupational status. Subsequently, Dorothy dresses herself in a leotard that, literally, makes her nude. The pressure that Dorothy feels is evident from the beginning of passage. Interested in keeping her job, Dorothy has allowed herself to

be examined in this way for occupational security. Dorothy has allowed her body to become a permeable boundary willing to acquire the meaning ascribed it by Russell. It is clear that Dorothy understands that failing to comply with Russell's request would put her job in jeopardy. Dorothy is able to submit to, what amounts to, a nude examination by Russell simply because she vehemently hopes to keep her job. Russell examines her from head to toe. He maneuvers her body, turning her around. He touches her without her consent. He touches her spine and vigorously examines her body. Of course, Russell is not interested in Dorothy Turnipseed at all. Instead, Russell is examining Dorothy's body in an effort to determine if she can become the bodybuilder *he* hopes to turn her into—Shereel Dupont.

From the time of their initial meeting, Russell begins to tell Dorothy that he is going to turn her into a bodybuilder. Dorothy has not expressed any desire to become a bodybuilder. In fact, having attained the knowledge that “Everything in the fucking world is wrong with [her] but [her] incredible bone structure,” it is Russell's decision that results in Dorothy's transformation into a female bodybuilder. “Tomorrow,” Russell states, “you start training. You're going to live, eat, sleep, and dream of being the best. . . . I'll fix everything” (23). Immediately, Russell determines that Dorothy's body, specifically her bone structure, makes her a perfect candidate for transformation into a bodybuilder. By dissecting Dorothy's body in this way, Russell posits himself as the figure responsible for the erasure of Dorothy Turnipseed and the construction of Shereel Dupont. It was *he* who found her. It was *he* who trained her. It was *he* who changed the way she talked. It was *he* who “forced her toward some ultimate shape that

only he could see" (11). Russell defines himself as the male with the ability to ascribe meaning to Dorothy's body and transform it into something that he desires to make it.

The patriarchal influence of Russell Morgan also becomes evident through the bodybuilding practices of social isolation, regimented training and dietary restrictions. The practices of social isolation in *Body* are clear. Russell serves as a patriarchal force within the novel and it is Russell who desires to separate Dorothy Turnipseed from her poor white origins. *Body* reads, "Russell [Morgan] was the one who had found her and trained her and named her, changed everything about her, even the way she talked, demanding that she lose her Georgia accent, as he forced her toward some ultimate shape that only he could see" (11). For Russell, Shereel's poor white origins must be exterminated in order for her to achieve success in the bodybuilding subculture. In fact, Shereel acknowledges Russell's impact on her life, *Body* reads,

He'd made her somebody, made her hear thundering applause and shouts of approval, even love. He'd given her a cause in the world, a cause such as she had not known existed for anybody. And for that, she had done everything he had asked of her. And she was glad to do it, even to having her name changed. Actually he had named her Sheree Dupont, but in her first contest (which she won) the first name had been misspelled in the program and she had been Shereel ever since. (24)

It is Russell who changed her name. It is Russell who'd turned her into Shereel Dupont. Later Russell states, "Your name is not *now* and *never* has been Dorothy Turnipseed. You goddamn get that down cold and believe it in your blood. You are *Shereel Dupont*"

(58). Throughout the novel, Russell is clear in his disdain for Shereel's origins. Russell tells Shereel that her "Georgia humor wears thin quick," calls her father a "bastard," and tells Shereel "All the Turnipseeds are coming down here to the pool. He [Shereel's father] said they all meant to go in a bathing. It took a while for me to find out what he meant. *In a bathing*—that's not even English" (24). Throughout the novel, Russell repeatedly laments the arrival of Shereel's family at the Ms. Cosmos contest. Russell's primary goal is to remove Shereel from all contact with, what Russell perceives to be, her embarrassing family members. Russell believes that keeping Shereel separated from her family members will increase her chances of winning the contest. During her training for the Ms. Cosmos competition, the novel indicates that Shereel has had very little contact with her family. Not only are Shereel's poor white family exterminated in this way, but she is also prohibited from her former, "feeandsay," Nail Head, through her segregation from her family.

Shereel's isolation, however, does not end there. Shereel's segregation from her family is paralleled by an emotional rejection of the homosocial world of womanhood. The novel reads, "She had worked tirelessly and without complaint, locked into her own private trance that had room for but a single dream, the top of the world, not only beating but humiliating every woman who dared to come against her" (77). Shereel's rejection of homosocial interconnectedness ultimately leaves her alienated from all social relations. She reduces social relationships to a mere game of absolutes. For Shereel, every woman is not simply to be beaten, but "humiliat[ed]" (77). Even still, if Shereel had wanted to form same sex friendships, she recognizes that "Russell would never have allowed it"

(119). Russell's powerful patriarchal influence leaves her segregated from both her all social interactions including familial and personal relations.

Though Shereel builds a body that itself is resistant to hegemonic gender categorization, the production of that body occurs under the stringent patriarchal directives of her trainer, Russell Morgan. Shereel's body, in this way, becomes the manifestation of Russell's own ideology. Marvella Washington, on the other hand, while appearing to defy gender categorization does so under the patriarchal control of her trainer, Wallace Wilson. In the novel, it is Wallace who is responsible for her transformation into the most muscular of the competitors in the Ms. Cosmos competition. In fact, *Body* reads, "Wall had created her—building her over the years in slow, agonizing increments of size and power and stamina" (78). Though it is clearly Marvella who does the laborious training and adheres to the strict dietary constraints, it is Wallace who owns her (79). *Body*'s narrator states "[Wallace Wilson] owned her. . . . just as he owned her younger sisters. . . . owned them the way Jesus had owned the disciples. He did not know when that way of thinking about them had come to him, but when it had, it stuck. And he knew it was true" (79). For both Shereel Dupont and Marvella Washington, it seems, their respective trainers claim ownership of their remarkably sculpted bodies. Both Wallace Wilson and Russell Morgan credit themselves for turning Shereel and Marvella into aesthetically perfect female bodybuilders.

For Marvella, just as Shereel, the patriarchal control of their respective trainers is extensive. In fact, the only manner through which Marvella appears to resist Wallace's patriarchal control is through her defiance of his desire to socially isolate her. Marvella's

refusal to become isolated from her sisters, Starvella, Shavella, Jabella, and Vanella is, in fact, the primary manner through which she rejects Wallace's patriarchy. Wallace states of the sisters, "They supposed to be back home in Detroit. Marvella don't need that kind of distraction when she's about to win the world, and I damn sure don't need it" (146). Still, while it is not explicitly stated, Shereel also rejects Russell's patriarchy in choosing to invite her family to the competition as well. Though Shereel is compliant with her social isolation from her family during her training, she becomes defiant in her choosing to invite her family to the competition. The Turnipseed arrival as well as the presence of Marvella's sisters at the competition become acts of defiance for both Shereel and Marvella.

Bodybuilding and Gender

Still, a single act of defiance does not obscure the fact that both Shereel Dupont and Marvella Washington represent their respective trainers' own eugenic-based desires. For much of *Body*, Crews leads readers to believe that bodybuilding is an agency through which the bodybuilders can break free of the confines of hegemonic gender categorization. In the construction of body, both Shereel and Marvella seem to exhibit an extreme muscularity that, at the very least, threatens to dissolve the binary system of gender. For Shereel's and Marvella's bodies, it seems that the cultural signifiers of gender are dissolved. In fact, in the novel, Nail asks Russell "What happened to [Shereel's] tits? What went with *them*?" and later responds, "...I seen bigger tits than them on master sergeants in the Marine Corp" (67). Aesthetically, it seems as though Shereel's and Marvella's bodies have lost the cultural signification of gender.

For Marvella specifically, it seems as though her monumental body causes the dissolution of gender categorization. In this way, Marvella appears to have utilized bodybuilding as a means through which she can resist and contest social constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality. In "On the Muscle," Laurie Schulze states, "The deliberately muscular woman disturbs dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and any discursive field that includes her risks opening up a site of contest and conflict, anxiety and ambiguity" (9). The bodies of the female bodybuilders, taken away from the patriarchal context in which they exist, have the possibility of "disturb[ing] dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexuality" (Schulze 9).

Unfortunately, the patriarchal eugenic context in which the female bodybuilders' bodies are constructed prohibits the possibility that the bodybuilders themselves can contest hegemonic gender categorization. Marvella and Shereel are unable to challenge and contest gender boundaries in two primary ways. First, Shereel and Marvella are gravely limited in their ability to challenge the binary system of gender through their relationships with their trainers. Russell Morgan and Wallace Wilson, more than the bodybuilders themselves, ultimately decide how each respective body will appear and whether or not they will conform with dominant notions of gender. Second, Shereel and Marvella are increasingly limited in their ability to challenge dominant society's definitions of gender by bodybuilding itself. Female bodybuilding remains remarkably engrossed in a desire for competitors to retain their femininity. Regardless of how muscular female competitors become they will, ultimately, stand bikini-clad on the competition stage performing femininity.

While the female bodybuilder appears to occupy a unique position of both challenging and complying with traditional gender categorization, it is clear in *Body* that Russell and Wallace are responsible for the extent to which their respective bodybuilders will challenge and/or comply with hegemonic notions of femininity. In the novel, Shereel appears to be the character that is both feminine and sculpted while Marvella is hypermuscular beyond the recognition of cultural somatic signifiers of femininity. As Want writes,

Shereel Dupont, a white woman middleweight from Georgia trained by Russell "Muscle" Morgan, exemplifies women's bodybuilding in search of symmetry and musculature allied with grace and femininity developed through diet and exercise; Marvella Washington, a black woman heavyweight from Detroit, Michigan trained by Wallace "The Wall" Wilson, exemplifies the effort to build musculature to massive proportions beyond any cultural definitions of femininity, using diet, exercise, and steroids. (156)

While Shereel builds a body that is muscled, she continues to retain the aesthetics of femininity by not using steroids. Though Shereel gains excessive musculature and reduces her body fat, she does so through diet and exercise alone. Marvella, on the other hand, happily receives growth hormone injections from her trainer, Wallace Wilson. While Marvella's character seems to defy traditional gender roles, Shereel's character manages, in this way, to comply with hegemonic views of gender.

However, it is also clear in the novel that the construction of gender in the novel has less to do with the individual bodybuilder's own desire to deconstruct the binary

system of gender. Instead, the construction of gender within the novel is stringently marked by the trainers of the female bodybuilders. Russell, Shereel's trainer, is convinced that she must produce a body that does not blur the boundaries of femininity. Russell's disdain for monstrous women is further complicated by the fact that the majority of the judges for female bodybuilding are men. Because Russell believes that transgressive women who lack gender intelligibility are women whom younger women will not want to emulate, Russell believes that the male judges

could only see size and thickness and mass. Consequently, there had been women bodybuilding champions who were downright scary, women who if you put a sack over their heads, stripped them to the waist, and stuffed their posing briefs so they looked like they had a dick and balls, the result was the ripped and muscled body of a man. Where is the little girl in Peoria, Illinois, who wants to grow up to look like that, goddammit? Where is the mother in Peoria, Illinois, who would suggest to her teenaged daughter that she go down and join a weight gymnasium so that she could build herself a body like that? Those were questions Russell Morgan had screamed at promoters of contests all over the country, all over the world, and at every international meeting of sanctioning organizations of bodybuilding contests. (136)

For Russell, it seems the ultimate fear is not that the female bodybuilders will become too strong but that they will become too masculine, too manly. Russell, an opportunist, also believes that these women will not inspire other young women to workout in

gymnasiums such as his. While Shereel maintains a natural musculature that is both hypermuscular and compliant with dominant society's view of gender, she does so under the patriarchal directives of trainer Russell Morgan. Shereel, for her part, does little to decide how her gender identity will be constructed.

Shereel's primary competitor in the Ms. Cosmos competition, Marvella Washington, appears to have escaped the trappings of gender. Marvella's massive muscularity, the result of diet, regimented exercise, and daily injections of male growth hormones produces a body that stands in sharp contrast to Shereel's. Still, Marvella's chemically engineered hypermuscularity is a result of her trainer Wallace Wilson's desire to produce a body that is, above all else, extremely muscular. Marvella does little that indicates her personal desire to build a transgressive body.

Beyond the patriarchal construction of Shereel's and Marvella's bodies, female bodybuilding itself also prohibits either competitor from genuinely challenging hegemonic notions of gender. Dominant concepts of gender are repeatedly reiterated in female bodybuilding. This problem occurs because the female bodybuilders often build bodies that eliminate breasts and buttocks. Furthermore, the usage and abuse of anabolic steroids and growth hormones among female bodybuilders can cause the voice to deepen and facial and pectoral hair to grow. The elimination of femininity coupled with the possibility of acquiring masculine attributes for female bodybuilders is problematic.

Regardless of the construction of their body, female bodybuilders cannot escape stereotypes that they are monsters and freaks because there must be "somatic compliance" to maintain femininity (Connell qtd. Fisher 160). Without somatic

compliance, female bodybuilders are simply monsters because of their transgression through bodily manipulation. As such, gender is a constantly changing designation and transgressors are often labeled monsters and freaks—the female body builders in the novel (as well as Earline) all represent transgressions that ultimately result in their designation as monstrous. Female bodybuilders are generally perceived as monsters. Muscle has been so uniquely defined with the masculine domain that female bodybuilders are often described in terms of their monstrosity. John Romano, in the March 1996 issue of *Muscular Development*, has written that, “These days you see women on stage in dire need of a third gender classification . . . [furthermore,] the lineup at this year’s Ms. O was appalling. I couldn’t even look at some of them. And I’m not the only one.” (qtd. in Heywood 77). Susan Cahn has echoed a similar sentiment when she emphasized that female bodybuilders are often “objects of horror rather than esteem” (qtd. in Heywood 77).

If gender is rejected when there is no somatic compliance with preordained conceptions of it, it becomes even more problematic within the realm of bodybuilding. Instead, it becomes more performance than actual fact and agency itself becomes an illusion as well. Agency, within the bodybuilding subculture, becomes just as performative as gender itself. As Butler reiterates,

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative

possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.” (180)

Gender, in this way, becomes an act consistently reiterated by the performer. It becomes a fiction that must be repeatedly emphasized in the performance itself. For the female bodybuilder, this may take the form of breast implants, heavy make-up, extremely artificial manipulations of hair, nails, skin tone, etc. According to Marcia Ian, “Spurious gender difference is maintained and rewarded in bodybuilding through the discriminatory valorization of certain aesthetic categories. Indeed bodybuilding tries to limit the achievements of female physique athletes by adding ‘femininity’ to the list of aesthetic categories they are expected to fulfill” (4). Because the embodiment of femininity is lost in female bodybuilders, gender is simply an act.

The competition between Shereel and Marvella reiterates the long-standing debate concerning gender within the female bodybuilding subculture. In fact, so entrenched is the novel in this debate, that it states that the Ms. Cosmos competition had “[been] billed as the Future of Female Bodybuilding” (*Body* 76). The question, it seems, is who will win the Ms. Cosmos competition? From year to year, it seems there has been little consensus on what exactly the ideal female bodybuilder will look like. Will she be feminine and muscular or simply hypermuscular? The standard guidelines according to the IFBB (International Federation of Bodybuilders) Official Guidebook state that,

First and foremost, the judge must bear in mind that he/she is judging a women's bodybuilding competition and is looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape, a muscular feminine shape. . . . [however,] it must not be carried to excess where it

resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique. . . . [J]udges may find other faults not seen in men, such as stretch marks, operation scars, and cellulite. The judges shall also observe whether the women competitors walk to and from their positions in a graceful manner. (Lowe 33)

The official guidelines of female bodybuilding indicate that gender itself is problematic. According to the guidelines there are clear differences between the judging of men and women. For women, penalties are aesthetic as well as gendered. According to the IFBB Guidelines, the musculature of the female bodybuilder “must not be carried to excess where it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique” (Lowe 33). The guidelines make it clear that gender compliance is not only desired but also a criteria by which female bodybuilders will be assessed. Individual judges are left to interpret what constitutes a “graceful” walk and muscularity that somatically complies with the female gender, aesthetically doesn’t blur the rigidity of the dominant system of binary genders (Lowe 33).

Shereel and Marvella, at the novel’s close, will both stand bikini-clad objects of the judges’ gazes as well commodities of the trainers who hope to exploit them for their own capitalistic gains. Russell and Wallace, the patriarchal trainers, limit the possibility that the bodybuilders themselves will challenge and contest hegemonic gender categorization. Each patriarchal trainer, it seems, constructs their respective bodybuilder as a monument of their respective capitalistic desires.

Bodybuilding Commodities

While appearing to have become exemplars of the female body at the height of perfection, the construction of Shereel's and Marvella's bodies themselves is the result of capitalistic eugenic-based desires of their respective trainers. *Body* reads

And Wall had bet his reputation not just on the side of Olympian proportions, but on the side of unthinkable size. He had decided it was the American way. Where was the American who owned anything that he did not wish was bigger? Wall's waking hours were haunted by Donald Trump, and his dream were shot through with whole populations of Donald Trumps, amassing, gathering, piling, higher and higher, adding numbers without end, because as everybody knew, numbers had no end.

(76)

Wallace's desire to transform Marvella into the most muscled of the competitors in the Ms. Cosmos competition is led by his desire to capitalize on her victory. Wallace's belief that bigger is better as the "American way" demonstrates his commodification of Marvella (76). Wallace believes that the more muscular Marvella is, the better her chances are of winning the Ms. Cosmos competition and securing financial gain for himself and his gymnasium.

Russell's capitalistic goals for Shereel are also evident throughout the novel. In *Body* the narrator reveals that Russell is convinced that:

The winners of female bodybuilding contests ought to have the kinds of bodies that women across the country admired and wanted badly enough

to drive them gymnasiums like Russell Morgan's Emporium of Pain, drive them there and make them willing to pay the price, mentally and physically, to get such a body. (136)

The implication is, of course, that the female bodybuilders ought to have bodies that are not transgressive, that do not blur the lines of gender. As Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, has pointed out, "The mark of gender appears to 'qualify' bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, 'is it a boy or girl?' is answered" (142). So entrenched are we in the fact that gender must qualify an individual, that until the question of gender is answered we find no qualitative measure with which to declare humanity. For Russell, it seems, young women, daughters and mothers, will want to emulate the female bodybuilders who become more sexualized as a result of their bodybuilding. Implicit in his assertion is that women who become more transgressive, more monstrous become less desirable in the heterosexual matrix. A woman, however, who sustains her role within the dominant heterosexual code have the kind of body that others will find admirable and seek to emulate. Russell, it seems, believes that women will want to emulate Shereel's body because it retains its place in the heterosexual matrix. These heterosexual women will, therefore, be driven to his gymnasium to obtain such a body.

The construction of Shereel's and Marvella's bodies themselves is the result of capitalist desires of their respective trainers. In this way, the bodybuilders themselves become commodities and rather than forming or owning an identity; they lose their identities. The result, is of course, existential crisis for the individual. In *A Social*

Critique of Postmodernity: Identity Crises, Robert G. Dunn writes that commodified identity formation is defined by four basic tenets:

First, the individual is turned into a *consumer*, and increasingly a consumer of signs and images. . . . Second, the *sources* of identity formation change as tangible, role-based relationships are subordinated to the disembodied visual images of mass culture. Third, identity formation is *exteriorized* in the sense that its locus shifts from the inner self to the outer world of objects and images comprising commodified culture. . . . Fourth, as a consequence, the self loses its sense of autonomy from the outside world. Assaulted by market-based systems of signification, identity now becomes chronically unstable, inconsistent, and incoherent. (66)

As consumer, Shereel believes that bodybuilding will open the window of opportunity. Nowhere is the more evident that in their consumption of the capitalist society that surrounds the female bodybuilding subculture. In *Body*, Russell emphasizes his desire to remind Shereel to not only continue to be a consumer of the visual images that surround her, but also, as Dunn states, “exteriorize” her personal identity (66). Russell states,

“Remember who you are. Remember that there are posters of you plastered on walls all over this country and half of Europe with girls working to be what you are, dreaming of being where you will be tomorrow night, and there is one of them somewhere who is hurt but working right on through the hurt, paying the price of pain and denial, and

the dream of you, Shereel Dupont, is what keeps her going when nothing else could; not even her will, her courage, her ambition to be somebody, only you, what you mean to her, will cause her to stand some day on top of the world, the very best of her kind, and you, only you, will have brought her there. You have made yourself special in a way very few people are privileged to know. Hold on to that, keep it in your heart and in your blood.” (179)

Russell Morgan encourages Shereel to strive to be the object of dreams, the object of focus that “keeps [a young, female admirer of Shereel] going when nothing else could, not even her will, her courage, her ambition to be somebody.” Furthermore, Russell encourages Shereel to not only to internalize these visual images, but, in essence, to believe that she *is* those images. Russell Morgan’s reiteration clearly disavows any hope of female empowerment through bodybuilding. Instead, victory for Shereel in the Ms. Cosmos competition, it seems, means completely losing oneself and submitting to the capitalist society that surrounds the female bodybuilding subculture. It means eliminating personal identity.

Two Forms of Eugenics

Shereel Dupont and Marvella Washington each lose their individual identities as they become commodities of their eugenic-minded trainers. The trainers, Russell Morgan and Wallace Wilson, can both be seen as eugenic forces within the novel. While Russell emphasizes the eugenic desire to build Shereel as the physically superior female bodybuilder who adheres to hegemonic gender categorization, Wallace emphasizes the

modern eugenic desire to build Marvella as chemically engineered superhuman at all costs (147). While modern eugenics focuses primarily on genetic engineering, it also finds adequate support in Wallace's emphasis that Marvella be the chemically enhanced superhuman future of female bodybuilding. Both Russell and Wallace, it seems, emphasize that they, themselves, are the eugenic forces who remain most responsible for their respective bodybuilder's transformation into the aesthetically perfect individuals that they have become. As the patriarchal forces within the novel, the two seem to represent two separate, though equally as damaging, versions of eugenics.

Wallace's patriarchal control of Marvella, while strikingly similar to Russell and Shereel's relationship, extends further than it might initially appear. The difference between the two bodies produced in their patriarchal relationships with their respective trainers is evident in the following passage:

Shereel was clean. She had never had a spike loaded with a syringe full of male growth hormones thrust into the hard, sculpted cheek of her ass, while Marvella's cheeks—just as hard and just as beautifully sculpted, but massive in their monstrous size and power—were on a regular basis nakedly proposed to Wallace Wilson's expert ministrations with needle and syringe. (77)

The difference between the two bodies produced is evident, but this passage illuminates the difference in the bodybuilders' relationship with their trainers as well. While Russell transforms Shereel into the clean bodybuilder, Wallace transforms Marvella into the chemically enhanced superwoman. Wallace's daily administration of "male growth

hormones" into Marvella's body is the equivalent of gene doping in the modern eugenics context (77). Gene doping is the chemical engineering and "nontherapeutic use of cells, genes, genetic elements, or modulation of gene expression having the capacity to enhance performance" (WADA qtd. in Hix 2). Gene doping, including the usage of growth hormones, allows athletes, in this case bodybuilders, to increase their lean muscle mass and reduce body fat. Rather than focusing on the traditional eugenic goal of improving humanity and its progeny, the goal of gene doping is individualistic. Gene doping, in this particular case, is utilized as a means of producing superwoman, Marvella Washington. The manipulation of her genetic expression with the usage of male growth hormones, according to the World Anti-Doping Association, "has an ergogenic and anabolic impact." The two bodies produced, in this way, represent more than Price's assertion of face queen versus monster. Indeed the bodies themselves represent, in the larger eugenic context, traditional eugenic versus modern eugenic desires of their respective trainers.

Suicide as Autonomy

Ultimately Shereel Dupont is faced with the loss of the bodybuilding competition to marvelous Marvella Washington. In an assertion of autonomy, Shereel commits suicide. Critics writing about *Body* often view protagonist, Shereel's, suicide as destructive. As Want writes, "[Shereel's] suicide is . . . explicitly a defeat for the freedom and health of the body and mind subjected to overwhelming ideological and disciplinary modes in . . . American contexts" (163). Other critics, such as Miller, also argue that Shereel's suicide exhibits self-destruction. Miller, examining the presentation of poor whites in *Body*, has stated that had Shereel come to terms with her "poor-

whiteness," her life would have been "radically different" (20). With *Body*, Miller contends, "Crews demonstrates that rejection of one's personal history can lead to destruction" (20). Furthermore, Lake asserts that "Although Shereel Dupont wins her weight class, she loses the overall competition to Marvella Washington. Shereel Dupont's independence ends with the competition. Faced with the inevitability of a future that she does not control, she kills herself" (62). For Lake, Shereel's assertion of independence occurs while she is competing in the Cosmos competition. However, Gary L. Long contends that Shereel's suicide is an assertion of autonomy. In "Silences, Criticisms, and Laments: Political Implications in the Work of Harry Crews," Long writes,

At best, control in the lives of Crews's characters is limited. Sometimes choosing to destroy themselves, they control only the moments that seal their fates. In *Body*, Dorothy tries to overcome the limitations of lower-class origins, and to take charge of her life, as a world-class female bodybuilder. She reshapes her physique, changes her identity, and vies for the title of Ms. Cosmos. Dorothy's newly found independence as "Shereel Dupont"—experienced during her minutes on stage and in the final preparations for them—is temporary, internal to the training and the competition. Win or lose, her past as Dorothy Turnipseed from Waycross, Georgia After losing the competition to the black, male-defined body of marvelous Marvella Washington, Dorothy commits suicide, a final assertion of autonomy. (30)

While I agree with Long that Shereel's suicide asserts her autonomy; I believe that her transformation from a poor white to a bodybuilder illustrate her transformation into a commodity. Shereel becomes a commodity primarily for Russell's own eugenic-based capitalist aspirations.

Shereel is ultimately only emancipated through her suicide; she exalts herself by utilizing her body—the object that transitions into a subject—as a final canvas of artistry and creativity. The lacerations she places upon her arms appear to be parallel, as though crafted through deliberate artistry. According to Stephen J. Greenblatt, “the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator . . . and the institutions and practices of a society” (158). The narrator of *Body* states, “The incisions—thin, the work of a razor—were parallel and ran up her wrist from the heel of her hand” (238). The manner in which Shereel commits suicide indicates her emancipation as artist and creator as well as her relationship with the society that surrounds her.

Indeed the novel's closing emphasizes that it is Russell, who is “awash in shame and loss,” not Shereel (236). Shereel exits the competition with Nail and while in the elevator her monologue reads “I have to get myself together. A bath. This oil.” “Clothes on. Oil off and dressed.” “Celebrate” (236). Shereel's desire to “celebrate” results in her suicide (236). Shereel's ultimate victory lies in the fact that she finally exhibits defiance toward Russell and both literally and figuratively constructs a room of her own. Her suicide allows her to release herself from the confines of a commodified body.

In Shereel's suicide, she rejects the society that surrounds her, the patriarchy, and gains freedom through a refusal to be consigned. As Dale Bauer writes in "Gender in Bakhtin's Carnival," "Literary suicide and sacrifice are metaphors for a refusal to be conscripted; suicide forces the internal dialogue into the open" (710). In *Body* the internal dialogue brought into the open is Shereel's connection with her feminine identity as artist and creator through suicidal emancipation.

Shereel's suicide further symbolizes her resurrection into a heroine whose death, it seems, will not allow her to be erased from the page. Shereel's final scene of immersion in a pool of bloody water contrasts her condition in the novel's opening. Initially, Shereel "had missed her period for the last three months" (11). The contrast between Shereel's immersion in a tub of blood in the novel's end and her initial state of biological rejection of femininity reveal her rejection of commodification as well as her symbolic connection with the feminine organic element. The metaphor here links Shereel with "femininity and liquidity. As the female body is prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid, so . . . the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element" (Showalter 219). In this way, Shereel is ultimately able to connect with her feminine identity.

While Want asserts that Shereel "produces a body discarded by the aesthetic and economic prerogatives of Crews's bodybuilding subculture," it is, in this way that Shereel rejects the ideology of commodification by regaining ownership of her body (163). Shereel loses the competition, can no longer believe in commodification, rejects it's implicit patriarchy, Russell Morgan, the male judges, and posits herself in a tub full of

blood, becoming fully realized. Shereel's suicide ultimately releases her from the confines of a commodified body. Shereel's ultimate victory lies in the fact that she defies Russell, proving that commodity is not something she wishes to keep in her heart and is willing to hold on to.

Shereel's symbolic nudeness her final scene represents her ability to no longer be commodified. Throughout the novel, Shereel's body is hidden under a robe. As the novel progresses, Shereel symbolically sheds her clothing, disrobing from her commodified identity. The final showing of Shereel's body occurs when she commits suicide. Shereel releases the blood from her body, a body which has become an object that she detests. Shereel regains ownership of her self. She stops blood and heart she has worked to create. By releasing heart and blood, the life forces of that body, she also releases herself from the confines that she has bought into until that point. The novel reads, "Nail took Shereel out of the water and put her on the bed and wrapped her over with the sheet. He locked the room door behind him and went first to his own room and then to the front desk." (238) Shereel's body is left never to be looked upon again. Nail covers her with the sheet, placing her in a shroud so that she can no longer be classified as a commodity.

When Shereel commits suicide she does so in a manner which leaves her body intact. She does not disfigure her body and instead she commits suicide in one of the least painless manners possible. Submerged in water, she precisely traces the veins from the heel of her hand up her wrist with a razor. Standing above her body, Nail attempts to make sense of Shereel's suicide. Nail, indicative of his own desire to construct a

meaning from his own life experiences, equates Shereel's suicide with an army major who had killed himself after having lost his entire platoon in Vietnam. The juxtaposition of the story of the army major and Shereel's suicide has led the final assertions of critics such as Lake. Lake maintains that

On the competition stage, she is something special, uniquely in control of her own destiny. Off stage, away from bodybuilding, she will be at the mercy of others—not only because she is a woman, but also because of her “grit” background. She has none of the education, skills, or connections that are necessary to succeed in the modern world. All she has and knows is bodybuilding. Having lost the competition, even the route to an ambiguous success is no longer open to her. (62)

I believe that Shereel's character finds success in her suicide. She finds herself in the position of connection with the feminine identity. However, Shereel's final connection with her feminine identity leaves the male figures in her life immobilized. Russell is left “awash in shame and guilt” while Nail ultimately destroys himself and the head judge of the competition.

Conclusion

Ultimately, with *Body*, Crews presents the female bodybuilding subculture as a eugenic subculture. By composing the characters of poor white Shereel Dupont and African-American Marvella Washington as female bodybuilders, he is able to reject the

previous cultural productions and eugenic notions that minorities and poverty-stricken individuals are innately degenerate.

As a eugenic subculture, *Crews* is also able to build upon the eugenic-based motive of building a superrace. In doing so the novel demonstrates the fallacy in asserting that bodybuilding is an agency of empowerment for the novel's two primary characters. Instead, *Body* reveals that the female bodybuilding subculture is governed by stringent adherence to patriarchy. Russell Morgan and Wallace Wilson, more than the female bodybuilders themselves, seem to determine how and what the bodybuilders will become. Russell Morgan directs Shereel's transformation into the sculpted but feminine bodybuilder that she becomes. Wallace Wilson directs Marvella's transformation into the hypermuscular female bodybuilder that she becomes.

Under the direction of their respective trainers, Shereel and Marvella become bodybuilding commodities. Their bodies become the commodities that the trainers believe will support their capitalist gains. As commodities, the bodybuilders suffer identity loss. The bodybuilders become individuals shaped by their authors, their trainers. Ultimately, Shereel and Marvella differ very little in their compliance with their patriarchal trainers. Neither competitor utilizes bodybuilding an agency of empowerment. Furthermore, with the closing of the novel, Shereel is emancipated through her suicide.

Though the female bodybuilding eugenic-based attempt to produce a superior human seems less frightening amid the twenty-first century of reproductive technologies, gene therapy, and stem cell research, *Crews* seems to ultimately demonstrate that it is just

as dehumanizing as previous eugenic ideologies. Though Marvella wins the world, she remains, at the novel's close, even more closely tied to the dehumanizing and laborious training regimens, strict dietary restrictions, and continued usage of anabolic steroids. Having won the Ms. Cosmos competition and produced the perfect body will ultimately mean that her bodily commodification will not cease just as the patriarchal control of Wallace Wilson will not end. Marvella will continue bodybuilding under the patriarchy of Wallace. Marvella's victory at the novel's close is laden with the grave disappointment that trainer Wallace Wilson will keep her subjugated under his own capitalist desires. Instead of producing the cultural change needed in the female bodybuilding subculture, Marvella will remain under the patriarchal control of her trainer. We, as readers, ultimately understand that, win or lose, the female bodybuilders in the novel remain dangerously commodified through the patriarchal relationships with their trainers.

Still, it seems that, in one way, the loss of traditionally feminine Shereel Dupont to monstrous Marvella Washington is rewarding in the context of the female bodybuilding subculture. However, because such victories rarely take place in the context of female bodybuilding today, it seems suspicious for Crews to suddenly break free of the confines of literal female bodybuilding to announce that transgressive African-American Marvella has suddenly become Ms. Cosmos. In fact, Marvella's consistent usage of male growth hormones seems to jeopardize the game. Is it fair to assume that Crews indicates that the most muscled woman *should* win the competition? Is it fair to assume that Crews demonstrates that Wallace's philosophy that "bigger is better" is the "American way" (76)?

The novel, published in 1990, coincidentally the same year the Human Genome Project was initiated, seems to illustrate that the Ms. Cosmos competition is about two competing capitalistic versions of eugenics. Marvella's somewhat suspicious victory, in the eugenic female bodybuilding subculture, illustrates that Marvella is "the [f]uture of [f]emale [b]odybuilding" (*Body* 76). Marvella's victory indicates the direction that Crews believes female bodybuilding will take. While Marvella's injections of male growth hormones jeopardize the fairness of the game, her victory indicates that she is the monument of perfect female form. Marvella's daily injections of male growth hormones point toward a post-human future for female bodybuilding and today, for America.

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