

INTRODUCTION—READING A CHILDHOOD

“Balls and Inclination”

Harry Crews invites his readers to speculate on the sickness of his dead father’s testicles on the opening page of A Childhood: The Biography of a Place. He opens with a story that was narrated to him from an undisclosed source. It is the story of his twenty-one-year-old father’s swamp sex with a Seminole girl, an act that takes place because, Crews believes, while building the Tamiami Trail in 1925 his father “could not have what he wanted, (so) he tried to want what he could have, but it had been miserable, all of it because of the way she sounded and the way she smelled and the mosquitoes clotted about their faces thick as a veil and the heavy black flies that crawled over their legs” (20). Indeed, this is a curious introduction to a work that by title and classification intimates that it will impart at least quasi-factual information about the childhood life of the author. Yet it is this tryst—one that causes his father to catch gonorrhea ten years before the author’s childhood begins—that Crews embraces as his “first memory” (19).

Crews does not let the reader interpret the meaning of this “memory” immediately. He complicates the matters of memory, narrative, and credibility further by imagining a detailed, dialogue-filled scene of his father, Ray, and father’s friend, Cecil, traveling on Highway 1 from the Florida swamps to Bacon County Georgia. Crews affords a justification for these imaginary constructions because, in spite of the instability of “truth” or “fact” in writing one’s life, he

knows that his reader's expectations for the *auto* and *bio* of life writing are at least somewhat conditioned. The reader responds to autobiography differently than she does to other genres. Perhaps this is because these texts promise to at least glimpse the "real." Or because, as James H. Watkins believes, the desire to read accurate portrayals of lives and selves is a longing that "does not disappear completely simply because we may lack faith in the credibility of a narrator or even in the representative capacity of language itself" (16). So, Crews pads his "first memory" with the following: "Did what I have set down here as memory actually happen? Did the two men say what I have recorded, think what I have said they thought? I do not know, nor do I any longer care" (21). He does not care because he claims that he would not know his father without such stories. Further, he claims that "I've always thought that because my daddy died before I could ever know him, he became a more formidable memory, a greater influence, and a more palpable presence than he would have been had he lived" (21). So, is the narrative life that follows nevertheless "true," if not entirely accurate? Crews is convinced that it is: "Whatever violence may be done to the letter of their collective experience, the spirit of that experience remains intact and true. It is their notion of themselves, their understanding of who they are. And it was just for this reason that I started this book, because I have never been certain of who I am" (22).

And who has been certain of who he or she is? Perhaps collected narratives are more clarified and justified in accounting for the creation of individuals' many selves than are individual memories. Individuals are constantly

confronted with conflicting mirrors that reflect different selves, mirrors that spring from their own minds and from the people who (or the mouths that) reflect their many pasts and presents. Crews mystifies the collective memory of his life and the lives of those that construct him with starkly honest statements, statements that offer far more credibility and insight into the complexities of who and why he is than the often heard opposite end of the continuum, “I swear this is a true story.”¹ While the author can construct the stories of himself, he will never fully construct one true self. Crews denounces the reader’s expectations for one true identity before he allows her to begin reading of his life. Indeed, the reader must struggle to distinguish among the narrated, narrating, historical, and ideological “I”s of this text, especially beyond the opening pages on which Crews willingly describes different recollections and re-constructions as all/and.²

Crews claims that “I have always slipped into and out of identities as easily as other people slip in and out of their clothes [. . .] Some natural mimic in me picks up whatever verbal tics or mannerisms it gets close to. That mimic in myself has never particularly pleased me, has in fact bothered me more than a

¹ Tim O’Brien effectively toys with the impossibility of recreating the truth of past events throughout *The Things They Carried*, (New York: Broadway, 1990). In his attempt to help his audience understand the “truth” of Vietnam in a text that is generically defined as “a work of fiction,” O’Brien writes “A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it” (68). Yet, throughout the text, O’Brien writes “this is true” again and again to complicate the idea that any removed narrative (or any use of language) can properly represent the reality of war. In life writing, this “reality” is always fabricated in a similar way.

² The idea of an ideological “I” belongs to Paul Smith, who Sidonie Smith cites in “Self, Subject, and Resistance: Marginalities and Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Practice” in her discussion of “the splitting of ‘I’s—into narrator, narratee, and . . . the ideological ‘I’—guarantees the obfuscation of distinctions between factual and fictional lives [. . .]” She goes on to speculate, “Since there remains no self, no authority, no truth outside discourse, traditional autobiography loses any special status. As the end of the century approaches, the genre as such seems threatened with generic extinction” (17).

little” (22). This is a text of adoption, of the selves that Crews takes on because of the examples that are set before him. Like the reader who opens the text with the hope of finding the real Crews, Crews opens the sources of his selves through his life stories, which are rooted in place, in order to better see his many selves. Readers should approach this text as a search for collective narrative records of the culture of Bacon County and for the root of the many selves of Harry Crews if they are to embrace evolving concepts of identity. And this is just what Crews invites the reader to do as he claims:

Whatever I am has its source back there in Bacon County, from which I left when I was seventeen years old to join the Marine Corps and to which I never returned to live. I have always known, though, that part of me never left, could never leave, the place where I was born and, further, that what has become most significant in my life had all taken place by the time I was six years old. The search for those six years inevitably led me first to my daddy’s early life and early death. Consequently, I have had to rely not only on my own memory but also on the *memory of others* for what follows here: the biography of a childhood which necessarily is the biography of a place, a way of life gone forever out of the world. (22
italics mine)

Notice first that the “memory of others” is singular. That is, Crews sees the recollections of others as a collective piece of property, a possession of Bacon that is rightly shared and carried and colored by the place itself as well as by the people who represent it in discourse. The harshness of place itself inspires this

discourse. Perhaps this is why he never uses the term “autobiography” in describing this text. Further, he acknowledges that this text functions as a search, a quest for himself through place and through the father that once dwelled there. He creates a map of the place in the hope that he and his reader can discern his traces and gain some understanding of the meaning of selfhood. And the map takes on another dimension as it forces the reader to search for Crews through descriptions of place and through representations of others as they search through his language. Just as the reader may empathize with Crews’s fragmentation as he describes “slipping into and out of identities,” she may allow his attempts at understanding his selves to help her see her own selves as plastic, constructed, and evolving.

A common concern that arises when reading life writing surrounds the motives behind the texts. In Crews’s case, I believe this brings us back to the sick testicles that greet the reader early on, one of which is removed to thwart gonorrhea, a surgery that led three different doctors to tell Ray Crews that he “won’t ever have any children” (21). This story illustrates that, at least ontologically, this text should not exist. Obviously, the doctors were three times wrong, as Ray’s future wife, Myrtice, becomes pregnant with one child that they lose in miscarriage, with Hoyet who is born healthy in 1931, and with Harry who is born in 1935. While Crews never directly refers to the “miracle” status of himself or his brother, he opens the book with a memory that forces the reader to acknowledge the special nature of his birth and the appropriate metaphor to begin a search for the self that focuses largely on stories, inheritance, patrimony, and

difficult circumstances according to the way in which all of these are woven into the landscape of Bacon County, Georgia.

In order to position myself, a female reader and cultural critic, in relation to the masculine undercurrents of this text, I must acknowledge that while I feel enough empathy toward and interest in Crews's life stories to honor this text in writing, I must also resist being co-opted into the male experience that this text offers to both genders. The "realities" of the narrated and narrating Crews are, in many ways, "for men only." While my goal is to show how these "realities" are constructed by a peculiar subculture of the 1940s South, it is impossible to fully push past the misogyny, to view this text as one in which women are supposed to identify with or participate in. My empathy toward Crews's life stories springs from the sentiment that he and his people are powerless, reactive, and oppressed by experience that insists that they cannot flourish, that mere "survival is triumph enough" (Crews 17). My interest rests in my belief that Crews offers to poor Southern sharecroppers what Judith Fetterly in The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction describes feminist criticism offers to female readers, "a unique and uniquely powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices [. . .] which spoke about us and to us and at us but never for us" (xxiii-xxiv).

While Crews encourages a different subjectivity in this text, the text is nevertheless filled with men speaking, men profiting. Crews never insists that his narrative is universal, but he does define his childhood in "specifically male terms" (Fetterly xii), hence the silent women that he and his father act upon that

open and close this text. As a feminist critic, I have a complex and conflicted relationship with Crews and his treatment of both genders in this text. I am critically aware of the discomfort, and perhaps my investment as a feminist is what leads me to attempt to unpack the cultural modes of Crews's Bacon. This Bacon circumscribes a time and a place that seem to lead the narration by contestory male discourses, "the entanglements of the web specificities of (his) material conditions and existence" (Smith 16), that display women as silent narrative objects. While I cannot change Crews's views toward women, as a cultural critic I can express the necessity of understanding how Bacon the place and Bacon the culture inscribe this text with meaning and inform the life of the narrated Crews. The misogyny in this text is read by all who open it. I attempt to create a new understanding of this text, to engender "a new effect of (this) literature [. . .] to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects" (Fetterly xix-xx) by steering the reading away from some objective sense of "right" and "wrong" and toward conflicting ideologies that may help *my* reader understand that Crews's sexism is an unfortunate and destructive part of what he feels he inherits from Bacon. The reader must face the violence and misogyny in order to seek its roots and problematize its origins.

At the end of chapter one, Crews returns to the testicle metaphor once more, but in a very different way. Moved by yellowed photographs of Ray from an old shoebox, Crews writes of his father's wild young life and early death. He is sympathetic to his father's childhood illnesses and is honest about his suspicion that his reckless life steered him toward an early death: "Maybe it was his

conviction that he would never have children that was hurting him, doing bad things in his head and making him behave as he did” (30). The harder survival in Bacon was, the more important and necessary family became. Tellingly, Crews writes, “a large family was the only thing a man could be sure of having [. . .] a man didn’t need good land or stands of hardwood trees to have babies. All he needed was *balls* and the inclination” (30-31 italics mine). With this, the feminist reader must painfully acknowledge that the root of Crews’s life story does not value or even mention the importance of women. This skeptical, metaphorical, male-dominated dissemination takes place among father, son, Bacon, and the reader. The father that gave life to the author and first meaning to the author’s life story seemingly had no guarantees because he lacked the anatomy to fruitfully disseminate both the necessary reproductive seeds and the meanings that shaped his life and the life of his people. The semen succeeds but the meanings lose their primary source in Ray’s early death. This text functions as a search for the stories and the people that produced Harry Crews, a search that is seminal in many ways: it is the product of his father’s unlikely dissemination; it is the substitute for a lost father and a lost place; it re-constructs the decisive, shaping influences of Crews’s life; it is central to the author’s development and understanding of himself as a gendered subject; and finally it is an influential and original collection of narratives of selfhood that is central to the reader’s understanding of Crews’s constructed selves and his place. Once miraculously born into a culture of storytelling people, Crews feels that his duty is to collect and scatter a gendered creation that will provide a meaning and a guarantee for a future for the collective

voices, admirable or not, of Bacon County in history. And so, A Childhood is born.

Crews first acknowledges “that I would someday have to write about it all” (38) when his uncle Alton (one of several surrogate fathers for Crews and Ray’s best friend when he was alive) offers to take him to a place where he can inherit some of his father’s lesser known stories. Crews tells Alton that “I thought the worst thing that had happened in my life was his early death, that never having known him, I knew that I would, one way or another, be looking for him the rest of my life” (32). So, Alton drives Crews to a country store and introduces him as “Ray Crews’ boy. Name Harry” to a group of men who are “apparently doing nothing very much but smoking and chewing and talking” (33). They look at the twenty-one-year-old boy for a long time and then launch into a series of stories about Ray’s large family, his tricks and foolishness, and his escape from a shotgun that one narrator proves, with scars on his back, that he was not so lucky to have escaped. As the stream of verifiable stories rests upon on the immense credibility of this teller’s wounds, Crews muses:

I wondered what would give credibility to my own story if, when my young son grows to manhood, he has to go looking for me in the mouths and memories of other people. Who would tell the stories? A few motorcycle riders, bartenders, editors, half-mad karateka, drunks, writers. They are scattered all over the country, but even if he could find them, they could speak to him with no shared voice from no common ground [. . .] It was in that moment and in that knowledge that I first had the

notion that I would someday have to write about it all, but not in the convenient and comfortable metaphors of fiction,³ which I had been doing for years, It would have to be done naked, without the disgusting distance of the third person pronoun. Only the use of *I*, lovely and terrifying word, would get me to the place where I needed to go. (37-38)⁴

At the same age his father lost his testicle, twenty-one, the narrated Crews decides that he must guarantee his yet-to-be-born children the chance to know their narrating father, their history. The Crews who at forty-two constructs this text in 1977 (ironically, twenty-one years after he is first inspired to write it) believes that if he leaves his son Byron without a mediated narrative of his life that Byron will find only a fragmented representation of his father and therefore of himself. Just as his father Ray realized that at twenty-one he might never have children to carry on his legacy, Crews at twenty-one realizes that even if he does, his children not find the right people or the right place (both of which seem to inform this story of the self) to tell them who their father was, no one to disseminate what Crews feels is their father's proper inheritance. Further, he acknowledges the pressing need to narrative to preserve, as Bacon is on the cusp of both physical and semantic extinction, hence his classification of the text as "the biography of a childhood which necessarily is the biography of a place, a way of life gone forever out of the world" (22). Crews believes that stories of Ray are representative because they come from Bacon, so Crews must tell his story from

³ The reader cannot be fooled by the seeming honesty of this claim. This text is informed by fictions, metaphors, and masks throughout.

⁴ And here the reader may be compelled to ask, does the pronoun *I* take him to the place he needs to go, or does he cast an *eye* on a place that he believes will lead him to an understanding of his *I*?

Bacon if he wants it to be credible and accurate. Grounded in a physical place, this text is as close to visible scars or tangible photographs that Crews can show his reader or someday his since-born son, Byron, to whom this text is dedicated.

What is This Text?

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a great deal of theoretical discussion surrounding life writing in all its forms. Two matters are most remarkable about these discussions: the sheer number of participants and the disagreement among them. I will begin my discussion and my theories of A Childhood with a look into recent critical conversations about the classification of Crews's text in particular in order to show that this work is not classifiable according to one category or one set of definitions. From there I will put the major theories of autobiography, especially those of Philippe Lejeune, H. Porter Abbott, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and, most recently, Paul John Eakin, into conversation in order to illustrate both how the reader approaches autobiography and how the theorist either defines or deconstructs generic classifications. My aim is for this discussion to provide insight into the complexities of life writing and explain my rationale in treating A Childhood specifically as a subjective biographic record of constructed relational life influenced by place. Indeed, the scope of this work goes beyond the sections that I lay out for it in this thesis. Yet, I believe that each of these categories offers a meaningfully disparate way to approach the function of A Place in this work.

While theorists publish more now on autobiography than ever before, A Childhood has not received much critical attention. Yet, there are a few notable articles by authors who share the recent concern with classification and textual function. In his essay “The Use of *I*, Lovely and Terrifying Word,” James H. Watkins applauds Crews’s regional purpose and his representative capability for A Childhood’s capacity to alter largely southern stereotypes: “by investigating his representations of poor whites with this autobiographical authority, Crews makes a bid to flesh out and humanize the southern ‘redneck’ and thus reverse a centuries-old trend in which this class of southerners is maligned and demonized, on the one hand, or treated a comic figures, on the other” (16-17). Indeed, Crews’s sympathetic and realistic sketch of the people of Bacon is notable; yet, contrary to Watkins’s claim, Crews does not aim to reverse the damaging portrayals of others. If anything, his textual constructions serve to reinforce the ugliness that coexists with poverty, with gendered oppression, in order to show his reader what it meant to survive in rural conditions at that time. In my reading, this quality is what makes this text display more than passing verisimilitude. For example, on the night after Ray Crews is buried, someone breaks into the family’s smokehouse and steals their supply of meat. Both Crews and his mother know who the man was, “he was one of daddy’s friends. I do not say he was *supposedly* or *apparently* a friend. He *was* a friend, and a close one, but he stole the meat anyway” (57). Despite the repugnance of this betrayal, Crews sees no reason to name the man or to really blame him at all because “it was a hard time in that land, and a lot of men did things for which they were ashamed and suffered

for the rest of their lives” (57). He claims to understand and empathize with the man more than the ever reader can. It is such an understanding that makes Crews connected to the suffering of his people and may help the reader get there too. This seems to be more of an indictment of social conditions than an attempt to unnecessarily clear the reputations of helpless, starving people.

The seemingly representative capability of Crews’s construction also informs Daniel R. Noble’s primary claims in his article “Harry Crews Introduces Himself.” After describing the beauty of Crews’s record of a particular and vanishing way of life, he moves into a discussion of the “reality” of this text to claim that Crews is “driven to tell the truth out of a fear of lying. Getting the truth said, in print, eliminates the danger. This leads, obviously enough, to a confessional mode” (17). While the text proper is not confessional in nature, A Childhood contains arguably “confessional” moments in that Crews forces the reader to interrogate some aspects of his narrated self of which he is not proud. It is not even necessary to detail the problematic nature of defining the “truth” in absolute terms as Noble does in his piece since Crews refrains from incorporating it in this way through his text—and also since it is theoretically futile to discuss the capacity for life writing to record “truth” this simply.

Two particularly “confessional” episodes come to mind. The first episode takes place just after Crews describes his first understanding of the racial difference between himself and his best friend. Crews explains that he begins using the word “nigger” because that is what dutiful children in Bacon were taught to do, and he writes, “I don’t know what difference it ever made that I

found out Willalee Bookatee was a nigger. But no doubt it made a difference” (69). In the same paragraph, Crews admits that while they were best friends he “sometimes used him like a toy.” In the narrative that follows, Crews and his brother convince Willalee that he must tote a heavy citron through a field to prevent a bull from charging him. Willalee is horrified of bulls because he was trampled and hooked when he was just three years old. The image that Crews constructs is one of his sixty-five pound best friend crying as he carries a twenty pound watermelon-sized fruit through the dust while Crews and his brother yell to him: “that big bull looking to hook into your ass if you put it down, that bull looking to hook him some ass, some good tender little-boy ass, cause that the kind he likes the best” (70). Indeed, the narrating Crews is ashamed of having treated Willalee differently given his newfound understanding of power and race, and he faces his shame by painting a cruel and unsympathetic image of himself as a boy for the reader.

There is a similar “confession” that takes place after the Crews family has been uprooted to Jacksonville, Florida. The narrating Crews writes of sneaking out of the house to meet his new friend Junior Lister, a local bully. Junior has found a buyer for a set of hubcaps that Crews agrees to help him steal from a new Plymouth on the other side of town. As Crews stations himself to catch the third hubcap, the boys are caught when he drops it and it slides to the pavement with a bang. An old woman in a wheelchair turns on a light, rolls onto her porch, and begs, “Boys, please don’t steal my hubcaps. Please don’t. Ohhh, boys” (140). Crews wants to retreat and leave their treasures behind for their pathetic, rightful

owner, but he feels the pressure of desire for a new friendship, so he helps Junior finish the job and safely escape. One half block away he turns and calls “I’m sorry, lady” (140), but the guilt born of his actions and his own weakness are apparent in its narrative reconstruction in the text.

Beyond categorizing A Childhood as a confession of sorts, Noble contends that Crews “has an ability to identify, to empathize, to merge his identity with the people he’s talking to and the situation he’s in. *And having made himself one with them*, the prose passes that effect onto us, so that we the readers feel what Crews feels” (20 italics mine). Again, there are some promising aspects in this claim as well as some ideas that beg interrogation, as they are very questionable and in fact, impossible. Indeed the reader can empathize (sometimes painfully) with Crews’ forgiveness of the meat thief, with his naïve Sambo-esque treatment of his best friend, with delinquent his behavior that is clearly the consequence of his social situation, and perhaps even with his treatment of women in this text, all of which are confirmed in but not justified by the culture of Bacon County. But how can a writer merge his “identity” with the people and scenes around him if that identity has no exclusive shape or definition? Perhaps he is not merging as he writes; perhaps he creatively merged as a child. And can a reader ever define what that identity is, either on the individual or the collective level? The entire text is an artistic creation, after all, and everything in it, including the characters, their actions, and their place is created according to authorial, linguistic decisions that the reader cannot fully know. Further, since Crews claims that “I have always slipped into and out of identities as easily as

other people slip in and out of their clothes” (22), does this text merely perform acts of social mimicry or does it lay bare a construction of selfhood that belongs to the author both in the text and in theories that surround the construction of self?

“Place and Imagination in Harry Crews” by Frank J. Papovich offers some insight into these questions, but it also serves to complicate the answers. After setting forth three intimately related perspectives from which Crews’s childhood arises: the literal land and its people, communal storytelling, and personal memory; Papovich contends that the “traditional and personal elements often bear only a coincidental relation to the certainty of the literal fact. Yet their truths are often indistinguishable from the truth of facts” (28). So it seems that Crews’s “identity” rests not merely in literal truths of his remembered sense of self but also in “the truth of imagination, both individual and communal” (35). In other words, Crews has many sources of self-“truth,” of “identity,” all of which slip in and out of the others as seamlessly as his constructions (based on the “real” and the “imagined”) do; therefore, the “merging of identities” is a useful phrase only if it is employed to describe both something that happens within the author Crews (narrating), the character Crews (narrated), and between the constructed subjects in this text. With this in mind, how does the reader wade through the complications of authority and authorship in A Childhood within the current categories that surround life-stories?

David S. Rotenstein once struggled for a way to explore concepts of authenticity in ethnography posed by Clifford Geertz, George Marcus, and Dick Cushman in the vein of the author’s ability to meaningfully portray the lives of

others. This struggle to judge authenticity found a voice once Rotenstein found the work of Harry Crews. In his piece “Ethnography, Journalism, and Literature: Ethnographic Text and Southern Author Harry Crews,” he takes Geertz’s idea of the subjective ethnographer’s duty of “inscrib(ing) social discourse” (19) by transforming the volatile nature of lived events into fixed written accounts and combines it with Cushman and Marcus’s concept of “experimental ethnography” (25) in order to explore the functions of A Childhood in terms of readers’ textualizations. In discussing the “artificial” nature of subjective ethnographic collections that take place on the false, preconceived basis of social distance and objectivity and the objective nature of journalism and novelization, Rotenstein concludes that no single genre can claim Crews’s text. There are simply too many overlapping guidelines to define its style or decide on its level of authenticity. In other words, Crews’s text does not fit into a genre—be it journalism, fiction, or autobiography. Rotenstein claims, “Crews’s cultural landscape, both in fiction and in autobiography, is a constructed image that blends symbol with experience, fact with fiction. He is in every respect an ‘ethnic autobiographer,’”⁵ an “experimental ethnographer,” and the author of subjective, anthropological ethnography (48).

How do all of these interpreted classifications negotiate with the reader’s interpretations? Would she read Crews’s text differently if it were defined as a personal confession rather than a social attempt to humanize impoverished

⁵ Rotenstein notes that he borrowed the term “ethnic autobiographer” from Michael M. Fischer’s “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory” in Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography, Ed. James Clifford and George M. Marcus, Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986, 194-233.

southerners? After all, it seems to be both. What if it is a text that displays merging communal identities rather than an experimental record of southern anthropology/ethnography? Why does it have to be either/or; does it matter? It seems to, at least according to the myriad and complex genres of classification within the arguably unclassifiable genre of autobiography. One could approach autobiography as a subdivision of the novel, as Northrop Frye⁶ does, or as a literary attitude like Georges May.⁷ Perhaps the most critical confusion arises when esteemed autobiographical theorists like James Olney and Sidonie Smith enter the picture to show how autobiography begs to be defined at subgenres.⁸ When the reader attempts to take A Childhood to task as far as the domain of classifications set forth in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, she finds that Crews's text slips into and out of at least nine distinctly different categories of life writing.⁹ And it is this generic contest over Crews's text that demands illumination through a general discussion of H. Porter Abbot's and Philippe Lejeune's ideas concerning life writing, ideas that are complicated once more by those of Paul de Man and other deconstructionists.

⁶ See Northrop Frye The Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton UP, 1957, 307-8.

⁷ Georges May, "Autobiography in the Eighteenth Century," The Author and His Work: Essays on a Problem in Criticism, ed. Louis L. Martz and Aubrey Williams, New Haven, 1979. Cited in H. Porter Abbot's "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories," 599.

⁸ See James Olney's "Autobiography: An Anatomy and a Taxonomy" in Neohelicon 13:1 (1986): 57-82 and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

⁹ These categories are working-class autobiography, historiography, new-ethnography, autoethnography, autopathography, life writing, otobiography, life narrative, and performance. While I discuss the implications of some of these categories in reading A Childhood, for further discussion see the chapter "Fifty two Genres of Life Narrative" in Reading Autobiography, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 183-209.

Pact or De-Facement?

While de Man contends that autobiography does not belong to any genre or subgenre at all, Lejeune focuses on a pact between author and reader in which the author promises to approach an understanding of his life sincerely and the reader promises to read it as such. Abbot writes to remind that regardless of the critical rift in the classification of the genre, “both the term ‘autobiography’ and its field of study persist, and not solely out of academic inertia but out of a sense that the term refers to a literary category distinguishable from other literary categories” (600). Abbot’s argument rests on the belief that autobiography is a text of personal narrative action that is willingly understood as such by readers. He claims that readers maintain the desire to be simultaneously collaborative *with* the author *and* mystified *by* him at once. Warning the contemporary theorist against a deconstructive reading of autobiography, Abbot reminds his reader that the author cannot be erased from his life story; indeed, to read autobiographically is to keep the author in mind constantly:

If we read with ‘suspicion’ in a deconstructive sense—that is, we show how a text produces constructions that conflict with or cancel what at first appeared to be its shape and meaning—we are also still playing the game of fiction. ‘Suspicion’ in this sense is not suspicion of an author and his or her intentions, but suspicion of language and the deferral of the signified [. . .] (this) approach aspires to a purity of fictive response, erasing the author altogether. (608)

In Abbot's view, autobiography differs from fiction and from history because its contents are dominated by narrative action that illustrates what was. To tell the story of that action is to include an agent with a point of view,¹⁰ and in life writing, that agent is most often the author of the text. The act of writing one's life is distinguished from the writing of journalism and fiction by the understood or proposed identifications of both autobiographers and their readers, and the reader's gaze is never distracted from the "identity" of the author. Here readers are still "allowed" to entertain hopes of factual or conceptual accuracy. Further, autobiography is not a text that begins or ends—it is always an event in progress because it is a text that is guided by ongoing narrative motion, motion based upon the selves of the author that too are always progressing or regressing.

Lejeune's "Autobiographical Pact" is not an argument for verifiable narrative action or historical authenticity. It is concerned with the "self-referential gesture itself as the central and determining event in the transaction of autobiographical reference" (Eakin, Forward to Lejeune's On Autobiography x). According to Eakin, to read autobiography a la Lejeune, one must credit the author's sincerity while remaining receptive of his imaginative art and naïve to his motives, his intentions (xiii). Lejeune's series of redefinitions and explanations that surround how to treat the genre begin with a definition of autobiography as,

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion of the organization and action of narrative time, see David Carr's "Place and Time: On the Interplay of Historical Points of View," History and Theory 40.4 (2001): 153-167. Most notable in this article is Carr's treatment of the paradox of the readers of historical situations. He writes, "the more we seem to take seriously and understand the reality of another person, the more we need an understanding of the 'unreal' reality which is, for that person, the real world [. . .] but we cannot reduce the real world to the contents of another's mind [. . .] we must enter into his description of a spatial and a temporal world" (157-158). The reader of A Childhood finds a fairly well mapped series of years and can appropriate specific time through their social customs and the cycle of the harvest. Yet, when the family moves to Florida, specificity in time and in space seems to fall apart. I will return to this idea in chapter two.

“retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Rather than unpack the problematic nature of exactly what constitutes the “story of his personality,” Lejeune moves into most troublesome readerly questions, “who is ‘I?’—i.e., who is it who *says* ‘Who am I?’” (8)? He answers that ‘I’ signifies the author’s name, and he remarks that the significance of this name rests in the fact that it is linked to a real person. With this in mind, Lejeune contends,

An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text, he is the connection between the two. The author is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person, all the while believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse,¹¹ and so he imagines what he is like from what he produces. (11)

In Lejeune’s theory, as the reader tries to distinguish fiction from autobiography, there is no need for the reader to go into the world-beyond-the-text to determine the “I” because the text itself offers the final word on the imagined, constructed world. Yet, the knowledge that the text is self-referential determines the attitude of the reader. The reader will inevitably read as a detective, as one who searches for errors, for breaches of contract (14).

¹¹ In this sense, Lejeune uses story as a metaphor for discourse, as seen in Eakin’s interpretation in the Forward to *On Autobiography*: “the true reference of *story* in autobiography is not to some comparatively remote period in the subject’s past but rather to the unfolding in language of the autobiographical act itself” (xiii).

Lejeune acknowledges the indetermination of the first person in self-referentiality and claims that “I” is counterbalanced when it is grounded in the name on the title page and the proper name of the narrator and protagonist. They “are the figures to whom the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance refer *within the text*; the author, represented at the edge of the text by his name, is the referent to whom the subject of enunciation refers by reason of the autobiographical pact” (21). Within the boundaries of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is the claim that autobiography functions exactly as biography, history, and science do. Implicit in the pact is the claim that autobiography will provide insight into a “reality” that rests outside of the domains of the text. Self-referentiality is not without a claim to verification, a resemblance of the “truth,” the image of the “real.” Lejeune writes: “All referential texts thus entail what I will call a ‘referential pact,’ implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the texts lay claim” (22). The referential pact, he notes, is not as abrupt and total as “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” because it allows *accidental* distortions and lapses in memory. Unfortunately, reader, author, and narrator may all define and believe the text as “truth” yet, according to this definition, it is not, if only according to the world-beyond-the-text, which, in effect, is the “real” world.

In other words, Lejeune argues that the author must be identical to both protagonist and main character while he is the connection between the real person and the person producing this discourse in order for the work to be generically

defined as autobiography. Deconstructive theory takes Lejeune's belief in the sincerity of the author's intentions and in the truth of records of lives and personalities to task. Maria Todd uses Derrida's Glas to question the Lejeunian notion of identity that is grounded in a subject that is present to itself because "this is quickly supplemented by an exterior sign that would guarantee the intention" (2). This sign is the proper name and the appearance of it in the form of a signature on the cover to the autobiographical text. Does the proper name maintain institutional value and does the author have an empirical existence that bears the same name as the subject of the text in order to authenticate this pact? Derrida and Todd both seem to believe that it does not, and post-structuralist criticism works to show just how badly Lejeune underestimates the problem of the signature.

Ten years before Abbott and five years after Lejeune brought forth their theories, Paul de Man argued for a deconstructive approach on the opposite end of classification continuum. De Man believes that theorists cannot treat autobiography as a genre among others because there is too much distance that removes the author from his stories and because there is an inherent problem in the union of aesthetics and history. He paints autobiography as "slightly disreputably" and "self indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values" (919). After de Man relegates the "problematic" and "confining" generic definition to a whirligig and a revolving door on which readers spin, he claims:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or mode, but a figure of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies *differentiation* as well as *similarity*, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical. (921-922)

And, in this view, if all texts are in some sense reflective, afford an extensive view, and are therefore autobiographical, then no texts are autobiographical. De Man explains that the moment of sight or reflection that is a part of textual understanding is really just the reader's awareness of the author's use of metaphor, of the "tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of the self" (922). With the claim that readers are interested in autobiography because it shows the "impossibility of closure and of totalization" and not because it reveals reliable self-knowledge, de Man directly criticizes Lejeune for his argument that the genre is representational, cognitive, and grounded in speech acts rather than tropology (922). In a sentence that parallels Lejeune's infamous argument from "The Autobiographical Pact," de Man writes,

“the name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological authority” (922). He further criticizes Lejeune for using “proper name” and “signature” interchangeably and for remaining outside of the proper discourse of autobiography as a system of tropes.

De Man’s deconstruction of Wordsworth’s Essays upon Epitaphs plays with the textualization of the words “face” and “deface” as well as “figure,” “figuration,” and “disfiguration” within a discussion of textual function. Through his deconstruction, he shows that life does not produce autobiography; quite the contrary; the text produces the life of the author. And the production of that life is always limited and governed by “the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium” (920). According to de Man, the way that Lejeune and his ilk read autobiography is stuck in a “double motion” as they try to evade the subject’s use of metaphor to overcome the reflective structure of a subject that is no longer a subject in order to claim some transcendental authority and pass judgment to verify the authenticity of the signature and the signer’s behavior. With deconstruction, autobiographical assumptions cannot be verified because reader, author, and subject exist in language and language alone. The gulf of difference and misunderstanding that language propagates ensures that each member of the Lejeune’s pact is deprived of “the shape and sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding” (930). This, of course, leads to Derrida’s notion of otobiography.

In The Ear of the Other, a text that is composed of Derrida's theories of autobiography, transference, and translation as they occur in his writing and in two roundtable discussions, Derrida poses another way to see the signature of the author of autobiography. In his treatment of Nietzsche's Ecce Homo and Thus Spoke Zarathustra Derrida contends that the undersigned name of the author signifies a life that has no owner "except as the effect of a secret contract" (9) with the reader. In other words, the other, the reader, honors the contract when she "opens and encrypt(s)" the text. Derrida believes that the act of writing autobiography unnaturally forces the writer to say, "who he is," and this unnatural situation encourages him to "dissimulate behind masks" (10). The reader is mistaken, for example, if she understands the signature "Harry Crews" as a presentation or a statement of identity. For Derrida, there is no "'Me, such a person,' male or female, an individual or collective subject, 'Me, psychoanalysis,' 'Me, metaphysics'" (10). He views the contract both as a permeable "hymen" and as a tympanic membrane, hence the "oto" of otobiography. The contract, therefore, moves between truth and fiction; it is a way of hearing the text that allows the autobiographical to be either/or, both/and according to any given interpretation. The contract signifies (n)either truth nor fiction, (n)either identity nor dissimilarity—it effectively presents the ambiguity of the autobiographical situation and removes the decision from author, text and reader, as (n)either could ever decide the "truth" involved in the autobiography.

On one hand, all statements and interpretations of autobiography are possible and "necessarily contradictory" (Derrida 15). On the other, the signature

can only be validated, understood, and honored when the reader associates herself with the meaning of that signature by lending a keen ear:

In some way the signature will take place on the addressee's side, that is, on the side of him or her whose ear will be keen enough to hear my name, for example, or understand my signature, that with which I sign [. . .] signature does not take place when he writes [. . .] (though it does) when the other comes to sign with him, to join with him in alliance and, in order to do so, to hear and understand him [. . .] it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. (50-51)

Clearly, Derrida details a play of difference within the word *auto* (*oto*) just as he plays with the maze-like structure of the ear as a perceiving organ that is parallel to the functional maze of autobiography and all textual interpretation. The reader cannot honor the pact implied by the signature until the signature, its actual aural sound, and its meanings are deferred just as she cannot interpret a sound until it is deferred through the canal of the ear. Derrida notes, "it is rather paradoxical to think of an autobiography whose signature is entrusted to the other, one who comes along so late and is so unknown [. . .] (but) every text answers to this structure" (51). This is the structure not just of autobiography but also of the concepts and words that textually compose knowledge through the play of *how* a text means. The autobiography does not come about until the ear of the reader, the other who arrives long after it is written, receives it. The reading acts construct the play of difference in the text and therefore construct the text proper.

Before I move into A Place, I must address the contemporary theories of autobiography posed by Paul John Eakin, as they, in combination with the insights discussed above, provide the language and the backdrop for my reading of Crews's text in subsequent chapters. While Eakin's 1999 text How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves dives extensively in cognitive theories of neurology, psychology, and memory, it also provides a theory of autobiography that merges the narrative and reader based theories of Abbott and Lejeune with the deconstructive readings of de Man and Derrida. Eakin acknowledges the slippery nature of concepts such as body, self, person, identity, and subject and theorizes on the nature of the split self in terms of the autobiographical "I"s of the text. That is, in A Place there is an "I" of the mind, an "I" of the body, different "I"s in time, and "I"s for the subject (who is arguably not a person), as well as for the author, the protagonist, the child-self, and so forth. According to Eakin, within the body of the text, "I" and Harry Crews are not mutually substitutable and the "I" is neither the singular nor first in terms of "first" person. He writes, "Why do we so easily forget that the first person of autobiography is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation? Because autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I write my story; I say who I am; I create myself*" (43).

In order to interrogate the "disarming simplicity" (ix) that many readers surrender to when they approach matters of self and self-experience (especially according to the illusion of authorial self-determination), Eakin contends that all selves (and all identities) are relational:

Given the face-off between experiential accounts of the ‘I,’ on the one hand, and the deconstructive analyses of the ‘I’ as illusion on the other, my instinct is to approach autobiography in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, *asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being ‘I’—and, in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an ‘I’.* (4)

With this idea, Eakin hopes for a definition of autobiography that can be “stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed” (43-44). Given Eakin’s definition, others largely determine the text that Crews constructs. People, structures, places, events, mores, traditions, and circumstances—his text is the story of a relational self built by all of these others and other others that the reader may not actually see/hear because they are enclosed in the life of a text that has nothing beyond it. The reader does come to know the cultural experience within which Crews’s sense of being “I” grew. It is the reader who has the final say in the meaning of both the biography and autobiography of the selves of the author and these others, while the meaning/interpretation is contingent on the text. The narrative structure of A Childhood and the subtitle and focus on The Biography of a Place tells the reader “something fundamental about the relational structure of the autobiographer’s identity, about its roots and involvement in another’s life and story [. . .] the space of autobiography, the space of the self, is literally occupied by the autobiography and self of the other” (Eakin 60-61). In A Childhood, Crews’s roots and

involvement in the life and story of the landscape, the place, serve both a tropological and ideological function for the reader. Perhaps by reading the relational life between Crews and “a place,” one can gain a clear understanding of the subjection by land, boundaries, language, and social/regional politics that shape and form the selves of Bacon County. Perhaps a reading of relational life and relational place can lay bare the meaning of the many “I”s of the text and the authorial force that rests behind it.

When faced with Lejeune’s two genres of collaborative (relational) autobiography, Eakin elects ethnography over “as-told-to” lives written by “ghosts” because “ethnographers not only sign on the title page as author but also discuss—in varying degrees—the collaborative relation, and occasionally even reflect on the ethical implications of their interventions into the lives of their subjects” (173). Crews’s text, I argue, is roughly definable as such. In it he works to broadcast the voices of people within a cultural margin and replaces the *bios* of autobiography with the *ethnos* of place. While Crews is the only one who literally signs the text or can honor the contract that the text carries, his text is the needle that weaves a multiplicity of voices (both human and topographical) into the collaborative, constructed story of some aspects of many lives in two very different places—Bacon County, Georgia and the Springfield Section of Jacksonville, Florida. Throughout the text his reflection on the importance of collaborative relations turns on region and landscape. Political, social, and cultural relations inform the material reality of Crews’s imaginative, subjective

construction. To avoid looking deeply into these forces is to deny both the Childhood and the Place of Crews's life stories.

The culture that Crews constructs in A Childhood: The Biography of a Place is an oral culture, a culture of storytellers. It is through these remarkable stories and their roots in a rural, desperate, impoverished place that Crews builds the bridges between generations and affords a literal expression for his roots and the roots of working-class people in/on/of depression-era land. The text holds not the re-construction of a single definable place; it captures images of a generalized place, of many places throughout Bacon County, Florida, and the paths that intersect them through which topography is easily blurred. The fact that Crews finds, at the end of his construction of a way of life and place, that he has since been cut off from his roots provides an interesting point of departure for how the landscape informs the life story of both narrated and narrating "I"s in this text. While narrating Crews maintains a strong sense of the rural scene of his youth throughout the text, his is an authorial voice that is many times removed. It can therefore be argued that in A Childhood, Crews creates a brutal place that matches the landscape of his mental life after he has been deracinated from the actual place of his relational creation. Further, if Crews's selves and his text are relational, then the mapping of one of Crews's others, his place, provides a key to unlock the meaning of (and perhaps an explanation for the problematic nature of) the culture-specific making of selves in a particular time and place.

“A PLACE”?

Making a Map

In this chapter I explore the topography of A Childhood: The Biography of a Place according to several definitions of the term, and I attempt to interrogate the function of the geography of the relational life as both a physical map and as a body of interrelated subjects. The “real” subjects that Crews constructs throughout the text (including the narrated and narrating Crews) find the sources of themselves in both mapped places in time and in physical, social places. The text itself is also a map for the reader to interpret. All of these maps provide different forms of structure for Crews’s social world. As William Howarth suggests, like a spatial map a text too is “fixed in the vertical and horizontal planes of up-down, left-right, the lines marching along with brisk authority” (8). In order to delve into a theory that addresses Crews’s relational life as a form of geography and explain the implications of A Place, I will also explore the function of the place to which the subjects are disciplined and subjected, that is, how the landscape reveals power relationships and mechanisms of discipline. Further, I will seek the meaning of boundaries and borders, physical and mental, within that place; Crews’s narrative of the place and the way in which his telling shapes personal and social identities. The map of this text is a performance that creates a cartographer/interpreter of the reader—just as the oral culture creates a storyteller and the land creates a sharecropper.

Throughout the first section of his text, Crews takes the reader on an unfocused, zoomed-out tour of the land that begins with Cecil and his father making their way from the Florida swamps to Bacon County in a Model T Ford: “it took nearly three weeks to make the 500 miles up the coast of Florida on U.S. Highway 1, a blacktop double-lane that followed the edge of the ocean up from Miami to Fort Pierce to Daytona and on to Jacksonville. From Jacksonville, they cut up toward the St. Marys River, which divides Florida from Georgia” (22). While Crews provides an aerial perspective to gloss the spatial composition of Georgia/Florida, his description of the place consistently touches down on specific ichnographical descriptions that allow the reader to better penetrate the meaning of the landscape in the social lives of the people.¹² For instance, as Crews’s map traces Jeff Davis County, which is just outside of Bacon, he stops to tell the story of the murder of a woman’s husband: “she—seven months pregnant—was the only one to witness the killing. When the sheriff tried to get her to name the man who’d done it, she only pointed to her swelling stomach and said: ‘He knows who did it, and when the time comes, he will settle it’”(25-6). This leads the reader to an understanding of justice and legal protection in this

¹² This aerial tour, this peaceful view from the top that the narrator seems to have complete control over and that is destroyed once the reader and subjects become tourists is could be connected to the opening pages of James Dickey’s Deliverance, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). In Dickey’s novel, Ed narrates as he and his friends look over a map, “I watched the hand rather than the location, for it seemed to have power over the terrain, and when it stopped for Lewis’ voice to explain something, it was as though all streams everywhere quit running, hanging silently where they were to let the point be made” (13). Crews allows the reader to first visualize the land the way that Dickey’s Lewis wants to as he gazes on their map, “unvisited and free” (14). Though once the reader touches down on the landscape of either text (map) and begins to explore the terrain, all of the preconceived notions are shattered. Perhaps the connection of the opening of A Childhood and the opening of Deliverance is most interesting when one considers the fact that Dickey and Crews were good friends in the 1970s and 80s and that both coincidentally “became known as [. . .] the bad boys of American letters” (Bledsoe, “Introduction,” Getting Naked with Harry Crews, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999, 18).

county. There was, of course, a sheriff, but if a person in Bacon County is in real trouble, he either solves his problems on his own “or else became known in the county as a man who was defenseless without the sheriff at his back” (26).

Through the first section, Crews pinpoints specific locations within the greater topology and gives the reader privileged information so that she can penetrate the land and construct myriad implications surrounding it. The reader first encounters Bacon as a speck on the map, which is “as flat as the map it’s drawn on and covered with pine trees down in the bottomland near running creeks. Jeff Davis and Appling counties are to the north of it, Pierce and Coffee counties to the east, and the largest county in the state, Ware, joins its southern border” (26). As Crews pauses to narrate yet another story of the land, that of a bloody, escalating scuffle between Junior “Bad Eye” Carter and Jay Scott about some hogs, the speck again stretches, grows, and assumes multiple topoi of focus. The reader establishes specific contact with the place (granted it is conditioned—an event in the making) through the people and conditions that coexist within its map. All topological descriptions are informed by ethnographical information; the social and economic activities of the people are bound to the place in which they live. There is no separation of home and workplace or city and country—they live on and with the land that they work and Bacon is not on the edge of anything urban. The lay of the land mandates their jobs and communities, and it carves up their time as well as details their hardships and struggles. Crews’s topographical description of North Florida and South Georgia does not utilize written geography, history, cartography, or innovative technologies of sight—he

does not provide actual maps or photographs either. He describes the land as he knows it, as he remembers it, as it has been described to him. In this way the reader becomes an active participant in the tradition of Bacon's topology, an oral topology that unearths the social and political forces of the region.¹³

As Janet Ng states in her reading of Shen Congwen's autobiography and his Random Sketches on Travels to Western Hunan, "inscribed in a language that coincides with the political mapping of the land, the text leads the outsider, the metropolitan reader, into the territory" (89). Seen through the combined "eyes" ("I's) of narrated Crews (reconstructed memory) and narrating Crews (deracinated tourist), the perspective of Bacon is simultaneously intimate and distant for the urban reader—the map would lack empathy and concrete cultural character if Crews did not shape it according to both the language of his past and present. He maintains the privileged position of the insider, of a once-upon-a-time actor in a poor rural place; and yet he writes of the place in the elite language of the academy or at least that of the urban world. The mutual fluency between Crews and his literate readership places the land as other, as the object to be gazed upon, defined by difference, and appropriated into a discipline of knowledge. Crews is both a detached transcriber and a native informant of the culture of

¹³ In Culture and Imperialism, (New York: Vintage, 1994) Edward Said claims that the act of representing a place through writing is "to better see it, to master it and above all, to hold it" (99). In this way, Crews's representation of Bacon County is a mapping that prepares the land-as-subject for colonization, political and cultural. As Crews circumscribes the external geography, he opens up the society and its economic hardships to his reader and offers them the damagingly symbolic power of sight. As readers we commit a kind of "discursive invasion" on the textual landscape through seeing and knowing, which in Said's theory are the equivalent of conquering. Crews conquers the land by choosing what and how to represent it, by changing it in this text according to his imagination, his artistic pleasure. Said's postcolonial theories will come indirectly into focus when I discuss Crews's violence toward the countryside and the danger of "forgetting" below.

Bacon, and as tourist and outsider, he commits figurative acts of violence on the countryside. And by the end of the text, he articulates the paralyzing paradox of his duplicitous position.

The last two pages of the text record an incident from July of 1956; sixteen years after the narratives of the childhood that precedes it. He has just returned to Bacon after serving three years in the Marine Corps and is out in the tobacco fields of his youth once more, working in the sweltering heat and dust with his cousins. He cultivated the land for the first seventeen years of his life and yet, “Three years in the Marine Corps had not prepared me for a Georgia summer in the tobacco patch” (170). As the cousins tease the now city-boy about his suffering and exhaustion, Crews looks up at the sky and asserts “Goddamn sun,” and knows immediately that his acrimony, his forgetting of exactly what this implies is damning:

As soon as I’d spoken, I knew what I had done. The four boys perceptibly flinched. When they turned to look at me, the joking and laughter were gone. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I . . . I didn’t . . .’ But there was nothing I could say. I had already done what, in Bacon County, was unthinkable. I had cursed the sun. And in Bacon County you don’t curse the sun or the rain or the land or God. They are all the same thing. To curse any of them is an ultimate blasphemy. I had known that three years ago, but in three years I had somehow managed to forget it. I stood there feeling how much I had left this place and these people, and at the same time knowing that it would be forever impossible to leave them completely. (170)

The complexity of Crews's relational life story owes much to both his nostalgia from Bacon and his deracination from it. Both cultural displacements are important to the critical "eye" that he casts on and through his writing (Ng 94) and the imaginative language that he uses to construct Bacon County. The fact that he acknowledges the danger in "forgetting" the importance of land in rural life on the final page suggests that he problematizes the dialectical condition of his simultaneous identification with inside and outside as he constructs his textual place. He deliberately escapes Bacon in his adult life, but he seems to know that he must return to write about his past lives. The connection between author and sharecropper is nostalgic and sentimental, and yet, it seems that he could not choose one profession or persona without abandoning the other. The landscape that Crews constructs in his mapping is both an exercise of his literary imagination through memory and a record of the long and trying history of southern sharecroppers. Writing *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* is an act of re-mapping the territory of that childhood and that place. It is a response to the human impulse to create meaning from the pieces of a twice decomposed past (this is a text that records "a way of life gone forever" and a way of life the author left), to historicize, to control, and to rationalize the place to which Bacon's subjects are subjected.

The Place to Which the Subjects are Subjected

Section two of *A Childhood* marks the end of the narrative as told to Crews by others and the beginning of his personal recollections. He refers to the

shift from the narrative map created by others to the map he creates as an awakening of sorts. Since he does not remember his actual birth, he re-claims the moment of his birth of consciousness on a warm morning in which he awakes from a nap in the curves of an old oak tree in front of his family's large white house. This is his "first glimpse" of himself as an original source, as an acting, speaking subject of this text. It is also his first memory, recollected specifically in the dirt and wiregrass that lines his family property (58). Once the child subject awakens, Crews records a spatial acknowledgement of the pieces that map his childhood place. First there is the dirt road to the right and beyond it the tough wiregrass-filled ditch where his goats graze. Next there is the big house behind the clean-swept dirt yard, encased by both a porch and a gate that is weighted with plow points. After he dresses and eats breakfast, he walks out into the world beyond the house and immediate yard. He describes a mule barn, a cotton house, and a dim three-track road that leads him to a shack where other tenant farmers, the Bookatee's, live. On the road, he passes a sapling thicket, crosses a shallow ditch, and climbs a wire fence to get to the tobacco fields where the families are working. Above him everywhere is the sun, below him, the land.

And it is the sun and the land that draw him outside in the morning after the rest of the family has departed for the field. He says,

If I ever woke up and the house was empty and the weather was warm—which was the only time I would ever awaken to an empty house—I always went out under the oak tree to finish my nap. It wasn't fear or

loneliness that drove me outside; it was just something I did for reasons I would never be able to discover. (59)

He indicates that he does not “discover” his connection to the soil, to the curving roots of the giant oak tree; yet, they are both symbolic parts of his written and psychological map of his place. The soil on which he sleeps encases his dead father’s body and provides the food sources from which he and his family survive. The roots of the tree seem to parallel the security of his interweaving family/community structure of Bacon and his place within the community during his young life. Further, the narrating Crews alters and shifts the rural landscape of the text and the place of the people in it to lay bare the fruitful meanings of his place, just as mules and men and other rural beasts of burden shift the soil to bear fruits for harvest. Even if Crews does not consciously or clearly acknowledge the connection between human life and land, the psychological mapping of his desire to sleep in the soil, in the curving roots of the giant oak tree, provides a clue for the reader into just how invested his relational life is in this place.

This lack of “discovery” also marks the difference between major maps of Crews’s place. There is the topography detailed above, the patterns of roads and trees, the lay of houses and multi-purpose buildings. Then there is the charting of his mind, his regional psyche, which creates the text that the reader and Crews interpret together. Simultaneously, he documents his landscape to understand it and paradoxically tries to understand his landscape in order to document it. This textual mega-map is thus the combination of multiple “overlays,” some of which obscure the details of those below, like a series of anatomical charts laid one upon

the other. Yet, it is important to acknowledge and forgive the slippage that takes place among the many meanings of place, topography, mapping; there is no more of a clearly defined center for Crews's place or his text than there is for the language that describes it:

[. . .] because we were driven from pillar to post when I was a child, there is nowhere I can think of as a home place. Bacon County is my home place, and I've had to make do with it. If I think of where I come from, I think of the entire county. I think of all its people and its customs and all its loveliness and all its ugliness. (31)

It is best for the reader to deem this text as a thick representation of the likeness of the place to which Crews mentally relates his young life. Crews came of age while reading an actual landscape rich with the inherent plights of its people. The text is a constructed document of childhood anxiety, aversion, desire, and pleasure that the author uses as a backdrop for a social and political place as well. In this vein, it may be true that the landscape determines the text, the subjects, and the author with the author and the reader. No matter how the reader views place in this text, she certainly cannot escape it.

And neither can the people of Crews's Bacon County Georgia. As the landscape influences this text, it also molds the plights of the people in it. This place is pre-industrial, it is male-dominated, and its subjects are situated in harsh, wild circumstances where every man must literally fight the land for his own survival with his own hands. In A Childhood, the men internalize the harshness of landscape of their lives out of necessity and habit, and Crews empathizes with

the unfortunate result: “They were not violent men, but their lives were full of violence” (24). Crews maps the violence and its seeming necessity. The reader gets the story of “Bad Eye,” who chops off Jay Scott’s hand with an axe as Jay tries to climb Bad Eye’s property line. “Bad Eye” is later found floating in the Little Satilla River. There is also violence that erupts in the author’s face and forces the five-year-old to come to terms with the familial violence that manifests from a lack of options. He carefully recreates the social inertia and frustration that surrounds his stepfather’s decision to shoot the mantelshelf off the fireplace with a twelve-gauge shotgun (128). And his connection to and understanding of violent acts stretches beyond his kin and his place when he describes watching a desperate stranger stab himself to death because “It ain’t nair nail left in the world where my hat is welcome” (144)—after they have both been exiled from Bacon to Jacksonville.

Throughout the text, Crews illustrates what it means for selfhood and “identity” to depend upon the volatility and random acts of violence and desperation imposed by the poverty of Bacon. While the picture is often pathetically sentimental, it is also brutal and only imaginable if the reader has a context for understanding it. Crews strives to construct this context throughout. Interwoven between his own narratives and the stories told by others that implicitly reinforce the simultaneous struggle and harmony between man and land to survive are explicit statements and descriptions that make the reader constantly conscious of the suffering of people and the disciplining of people by place.

While the disciplinary function of the land does not explicitly mirror that of the factories, schools, madhouses, and prisons that Michel Foucault examines in Discipline and Punish, several meaningful parallels shed light on the mechanisms of power occurring in rural places. The bodies of the farmers in Bacon County are after all docile bodies; they are “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” because they are “manipulated, shaped, (and) trained” to increase productivity and assume a place in the social order because of the necessity of survival and the controlling powers of community expectations (136). Foucault’s notions of discipline, “methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility,” can be found in Bacon County in the need to domesticate the landscape and the difficulty that informs this task (137). While Bacon lacks a formal system of discipline, the watchful eyes of family members and neighbors manipulate and aid in the correct behavior of people who till the soil. Both dictate and control the gestures and behaviors of both men and women, and the primary mechanism that sustains their power systems and upholds their mores is the narrative language that informs the “proper treatment” of the countryside. For a gaze on the rural landscape quickly transforms into an articulation of what the viewer sees based on what the land seems to represent. Rural bodies, which are public bodies, in this text are “placed, moved, articulated on others” (Foucault 164).

The fact that Bacon County lacks explicitly formalized mechanisms of control and proper institutions that mandate the circulation of power leads Crews

once again to the land for insight into the subjection of his people.¹⁴ The sheriff in Bacon that tries to keep the peace, is, for example, hamstrung by a code of behavior: calling on the sheriff for help is such a deplorable act that the people “ma(k)e it right” themselves or else they are alienated, “brutalized and savaged endlessly” (26) by their neighbors and friends.¹⁵ Work and discipline in Crews’s place function according to local ideologies rather than the presence of government or institutional procedures. People in Bacon are subject to “realities” that turn on the distinct and specialized institutions set forth by family and community mores. And these ideologies are maintained and solidified through narrative practice: “Making stories about (ritual ways) was not so that we could understand them but so that we could live with them” (Crews 97-8). The land itself also disciplines the actions of rural people. They are disciplined according to their treatment of the land—the cultural landscape is a material object and an epistemology; it is a vision of the people that maintains its own set of rules, its own peculiar moral compass. In Crews’s relational history of Bacon, the human agent is always both an object and a subject (Schein 676). Further, the land and the people are mutually constitutive and relational as they produce, inform, cultivate, and govern each other. Like the crops in their fields, “nothing is

¹⁴ In “The Place of Landscape: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting an American Scene” geographer Richard H. Schein responds to the fundamental question of suburban or planned “landscape authorship” by turning the concept on its head (661). In his Foucauldian reading of Ashland Park, a suburb of Lexington, Kentucky, Schein claims, “[. . .] interpreting a cultural landscape is a geographically specific exercise that requires interrogating the role of landscape in social and cultural reproduction, as well as understanding the landscape within wider social and cultural contexts [. . .] cultural landscape is ultimately one mechanism through which such connections are formulated and maintained” (660).

¹⁵ Louis Althusser’s theory of state and ideological apparati from “Ideology and the State” would deem the people of Bacon “good subjects” because they need not “provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus” (61).

allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all—the good and the bad—carted up and brought along from one generation to the next. And everything that is brought along is colored and shaped by those who bring it” (21).¹⁶

In Crews’s small county, people constantly gaze on the productions of their fellow man. Drawing on the sentiment that the man-handled appearance of the land was just about the only matter a man could control on the harsh and wild farms, young Crews learns to define the quality of men by the appearance of their fields:

Some farmers always had crops that grew in rows straight as a plumb line. Others didn’t seem to care about it much, one way or the other. It was not unusual for a farmer bumping along in a wagon behind a steaming mule in the heat of summer to comment on how the rows were marked off on each farm he passed. ‘Sumbitch, he musta been drunk when he laid them off.’ ‘I bet he has to git drunk again ever time he plows that mess’ [. . .] For reasons I never knew, perhaps it was nothing more complicated than pride of workmanship, farmers always associated crooked rows with sorry people [. . .] the feeling was that a man who didn’t care enough to keep his rows from being crooked couldn’t be much of a man. (124)

¹⁶ Schein discusses the interplay of human action and landscape creation/reflection in systems of power as “discourses materialized.” The features of the landscape indicate how independent discourses arise from the ground and how the actions of the people are directed, captured, and disciplined by insurance agencies, architects, historical preservation societies, and neighborhood planners (666). Bacon’s “discourse materialized” does not include a formal hierarchy or an official subdivision—there are no outside consultants to direct local design or adapt surveillance techniques—there is only a social hierarchy based in the landscape that defines the difference between just people and “sorry” people and between parents and children.

Crews confirms this community definition through a positive example: Willalee's daddy, a man who plows the straightest rows is the kindest man that young Crews knows.¹⁷ The goal that "good" men actualize (again, men only) is treating the land, the place, with a sense of admiration, decency, well-marked boundaries, and respect. The same standard goes for the animals that inhabit and work the land, but conditions again adapt behavior in this instance.

Early in A Childhood, Crews describes the relationship between his father and Daisy, a mare that he was almost as proud of "as he was of his son" (47). Daisy is so mean that Ray Crews is the only person who can bridle or control her because "he had her respect and she had his" (47). The violence that Ray imposes on Daisy (hitting her between the ears with a piece of iron) to force her to perform like a proper draft animal, Crews claims, "was done not only out of necessity but also out of love" (47). Man and animal had to form a mutual respect for one another, and Ray's "firm, gentle, and dangerous hand" (48) was properly used according to community standards: "A farmer did not mistreat his draft animals. People in Bacon County always said that a man who would mistreat his mules would mistreat his family" (47). Man and animal come to mutual understandings in the public eye, and the public selects which acts of violence it condones and which it condemns or marks as "sorry." Again, the peculiar, problematic moral compass of Crews's Bacon County turns on masculine control of one's farm, on one's husbandry.

¹⁷ As Schein notes, "The zoned landscape is a disciplined landscape, and that discipline extends to the dweller within" (672).

Crews details other forms of community surveillance, all of which inform the status of the various people in Bacon. When he describes the deformity of his parents' first child the year after their marriage, he explains the cultural significance of infant deformity and creates his own theory as to why his first sibling was born and died with its liver outside of its body:

It was commonly believed then in Bacon County, and to some extent still is, that a miscarriage or a baby born dead or deformed was the consequence of some taint in the blood or taint in the moral life of the parents. I know daddy must have keenly felt all over again the crippled pleasure of that night so many months before under the palm-thatched chickee with the Seminole girl. (42)

Crews speculates further that the guilt of his swamp sex, his “taint,” drove his father to compensate by working himself to death on the land (he dies of a massive heart attack, he literally works himself to death cultivating the fields)—in this case the land itself exacts punishment (42). The failure of Ray Crews, his crime, is one of husbandry. The human agency to transform the map of a place, to modify the immediate landscape, to yield crops out of poor soil in order to disprove or reform a local discourse, is an effort to challenge the oral definition of Ray as tainted with a visual one that makes him appear productive, fertile, and masculine. But in the end, the land “tells” on Ray. The ability of the community to supervise the behavior of each member either visually or orally offers every person the power of social control to assess and calculate the qualities and merits

of individuals.¹⁸ Crews repeats this county lore and formulates theories of his father's misfortunes accordingly because these beliefs help to form many of his thoughts about his father and his own masculinity. And above all else, it is the oral culture in its surveillance of personal spaces in Bacon County that disciplines the actions and decisions of its inhabitants and sets up a hierarchy that divides men and women, adults and children, and further ranks them within their own groups.

A revealing example of how the people of Bacon clearly set up boundaries of insiders/outside, included/excluded and place and discipline the child occurs when Crews describes "the Jew's" visits to Bacon. As he rolls into "our closed world smelling of strangeness and far place" in a covered wagon pulled by a mismatched, morally suspect pair of mules, Crews notes the attitude of the people toward the Jew (82). He is a man who always dresses in black, including a black yarmulke on his head. His route is so regular that "you could set your watch by where he was on any given day of the month." As a man who deals solely with women, selling them thread, thimbles, bolts of cloth, silverware and sharpening anything from scissors to mule harnesses on his grinding stone, the Jew becomes an object of curiosity and fear for the children because he is an outsider who is of use to their mothers. Crews can "never remember anybody saying anything bad about him or anybody treating him badly," but the sheer fact that he *was* different from the people of Bacon allows parents to use him as threat: "When he spoke, he did not sound like us. For that reason he was mysterious and

¹⁸ According to Foucault, discipline "was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering, and using. Discipline organizes an analytical space" (143).

often used to scare the children with [. . .]” (83). Telling an unruly child that “If you don’t behave, youngun, I just might let you off with the Jew. Just let’m have you” was an effective form of punishment, “at least as effective as a whipping” (83). The simple difference and silence that radiate from the outsider helps the mothers on Bacon to shape him as a mechanism to threaten the child with the external world, the world outside and “other” than Bacon.

Another Bacon narrative that performs a sadder, more sobering disciplinary function is a story that Auntie, Willalee’s grandmother, tells to Willalee. He repeats the story for Crews in order to stop him from crying in horror at the bloody, violent sight of the clipping and mating of the mules. Out of compassion for his best friend’s fear, Willalee asks, “You know how come it is [. . .] mules can’t do it an git little mules like goats do it and git little goats or hogs do it?” (111). Crews pauses and contemplates this fact, and he realizes that this is something that he never questioned before. Willalee then tells Crews that “in the time of Jesus [. . .] it was a mule that had carried the beams out of which Jesus’ cross was made and for that reason the mule had forever after been deprived of the joy of coupling with his own kind” (111). In his wisest voice, Willalee then hands down the only reason for Crews to dry his eyes during mating time for good: “it also how come mules have to work so hard at the plow, on account of what all they done in olden time. Auntie say so” (111). This narrative functions to help children accept the plight of beasts of burden, and in a way, it reinforces morality written in the processes of farm life and animal husbandry. One may interpret it as a rationalization for the pain that one kind of sharecropping animal

must bear for the people in the land to survive, but since this story was Auntie's, it has immense value and a truth effect. Crews reforms his hysterical behavior at that moment, and he allows his thoughts to drift happily into the mystery of all of the sexual couplings he has witnessed in Bacon County.

When Mrs. Crews is forced to uproot her children to escape Crews's stepfather, Pascal, the family loses the discipline that is instilled in their relation to the controlling narratives of the place. The final glimmer of narrative control provided by Bacon people (according to narrating Crews) over narrated Crews's thoughts and behaviors, this time toward his father figure, comes as his mother forces him into his clothing and ties his straw suitcase for an escape to Jacksonville. He writes,

Daddy followed us about the house, alternately begging mama to stay and threatening to shoot something else if she did. There was no doubt in my mind that what he might shoot was me or all of us. But I still loved him. For all I knew, every family was like that. I knew for certain it was not unusual for a man to shoot at his wife. It was only unusual if he hit her. *I had heard enough stories*—many of them told by the same wife the shot barely missed—to know that. (129, emphasis mine).

The next six months of his life are not informed by the usual stream of comforting narratives told to him by Bacon people who Crews knows and trusts. Rather, the next six months live in his memory uncontrolled as “a series of scenes, flashes of actions lit down to the most brutal detail under a blinding light” (130). Once the family crosses the border between their place and the rest of the world, Crews

loses the narratives that control and protect just as he loses the land that signifies a disciplined “home” place. When Bacon is gone, so are the stories of it that control and sustain Crews’s people and Crews himself. Yet, Bacon’s stories are not forever gone, they are part of Crews. He does not forget the stories—it is that the family steps out of a defining place, a determining ideology that provides Crews (and his family) with the narrative structure with which to define himself and his place in the world. He leaves a place, a people, but the stories live on, as evidenced in this biography.

Beyond the Functional Boundaries

Ideologies permeate and inform the core of relational life, of personhood. The ideologies that constitute the narrating Harry Crews as a subject in Bacon County lose their place and force when the symbolic order shifts power relations in rural communities to those of urbanized cities. The family departs for Jacksonville, Florida, the afternoon after Crews’s stepfather eliminates the living room mantelshelf with his shotgun. Crews describes the 100-mile Greyhound trip out of Bacon with grotesque allusions and dreamy fascination. He equates the hot, full bus on which they ride with Hitler’s cattle cars, which he knew nothing of as the child traveling to Florida, but in writing his life, he “remember(s) it most often in that image” (130). The shocking connection between riding to Jacksonville and riding to a concentration camp explicitly highlights the narrated Crews’s moral compass (or lack thereof) of the landscape as it shifts from home

culture to a land of exile. The people on board are members of the Bacon community—“tired people savaged by long years of scratching in soil already worn out before they were born” (130). The landscape outside, so unlike his homeland, “looked temporary, as though it might all be taken down during the night and hauled away” (130). His delicate “country nose” (132) is overwhelmed by the new odor of “burned fuel (that) floated in through the open windows, choking us where we sat” (130).

His mother startles him from his fantasies to see the St. Marys River, “the border keeping Georgia and Florida separate” (130). But he is already staring at the black surface of the river and wondering what it would be like to fish from a boat and contemplating the plants and towns of different sizes that grow along the water. This is a remarkable moment in his young life because as he himself claims:

I had always been fascinated with boundaries and borders—the Little Satilla, for instance, separating Appling County from Bacon, made me feel safe and good when I started to sleep at night, knowing that it was keeping all of us in and all of them out—but the St. Marys River was a border that went beyond fascination. Before mama spoke to me, I had recognized the river although I had never seen it before. I knew also it formed the border although I don’t remember anybody ever telling me that it did. The vague shape of streets and houses and buildings and factories began to filter down behind my eyes. I knew I had never seen any of it before but if I concentrated, I could see all of it. (131)

At this moment he realizes that they are going to the Springfield Section of Jacksonville, the place where people from Bacon are exiled “when our people and our place could no longer sustain us” (131). His Bacon life was filled with stories of Jacksonville, and he comes to believe that the voyage is a “helpless” and “fatalistic” consequence of their impoverished lives (131). Crews knows that the move will provide a trade-off of sorts: land and place for safety from stepfather Pascal and indoor plumbing. Yet what he does not note, or even consider at this point in the narrative, is that in crossing the boundary he will lose the imaginative, narrative life that offered his life shape, discipline, and comfort in Bacon. As he closes his eyes behind the sliding airstrip and “sees” a world he has never inhabited before, he commits his last act of recorded, shared narrative imagination for the next six months and twenty pages of The Biography of a Place.

Crews’s recorded memories in A Childhood are mapped but not re-mapped before Crews becomes a subject of urban identity, before he falls victim to a different type of landscape, to the fragmented, decentered architecture of the modern world. After he fully acknowledges his (and Bacon’s) rural cultural erasure (remember this text aims to preserve “a way of life gone forever out of the world”) as still vanishing, there is still the mind-map of Bacon that exists in the text (20). The “Springfield Section” is like a preview of the erasure of rural culture. The act of cutting off, stopping, arresting the erasure of Bacon in the text reveals the paradoxes of his imaginative plight and his biographic responsibilities. His narrative acts in Bacon move the “I” toward a community, across and beyond the boundaries of a single subject or self. The absence of narrative community in

Jacksonville highlights the loss of self-creating and self-preserving objects and therefore forces Crews to acknowledge other losses in himself as well.

Since where and how they lived in Bacon was “almost hermetically sealed from everything and everybody else, fabrication became a way of life” (67), stories of the place served to help the people both “understand the way we lived” and defend against it (67). In Jacksonville, there are no such stories because despite the new proximity of the homes and the great size of the buildings, there is no space for community or imagination in the city. The rural childhood home fades to black at this moment in the text, and the constructions that spring from the “Springfield Section” of two maps, textual and spatial, forge a diegetic shift that provides insight into the invasive, desolate experience of displacement for both reader and author.

Writing life stories is a process of combining chunks of the images of once experienced life into a kind of discursive continuity or narrative understanding. The twenty-page account of the Springfield Section within A Childhood: The Biography of a Place is remarkably different from the rest of Crews’s accounts in tone, context, and composition. When A Place is out of sight, its biography shifts and in many ways temporarily dies. Jacksonville is another kind of place, a place of which “(f)armer’s laconic voices always spoke [. . .] in the same helpless and fatalistic way” (131). It is a place in which Crews’s mother gives “terse, elliptical explanations of how things were” (134) because there she is “sullen and full of frowns, darkly muttering so that only a word or two came through to us now and then” (135). In Jacksonville, Crews does not question the words of others (137)

because there “(t)alking wasn’t going to do any good” (144). Reading the urban world for Crews is a lesson in reflecting on his deracinated subject position, and the political consequence seems to rest in his failed effort to find the old encompassing, sheltering narrative that defined his relational life in Bacon and in the textual constructions that come before and after the move to Jacksonville. It seems that Crews cannot properly narrativize himself in Jacksonville because his body and his imagination are both disembodied from their comfortable, proper contexts. Crews shifts from one who “belongs,” who understands his surroundings, to one who does not belong. He is mystified by his new location. In Placing Autobiography in Geography, Pamela Moss writes, “autobiography overlaps most with its companion, biography, and is used primarily to chronicle geography as a discipline [. . .] to write biography, one must know his/her own life story [. . .] we also have to accept that in order to write one’s own life story, one must know how an ‘I’ fits with other lives, the ‘shes,’ ‘hes,’ ‘wes,’ and ‘theys’” (12). In writing a relational life that is bound to place, like Crews’s A Childhood, the “I” that functions as the main character must know how he fits with the “heres,” “theres,” and “not theres” as well, how he matches or mismatches them as he crosses between different landscapes, points in time, and conditions.

Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift provide a contention in the conclusion to their anthology Mapping the Subject that is relevant to my discussion of the boundaries in A Childhood. They write, “Boundaries are very important, both as ways of fixing and displaying the subject by making it impossible to move (a state of

affairs which Foucault has made us keenly aware) and as ways of positively constructing the subject, since they signal when and where one has moved” (374). In Crews’s relational text, the crossing of boundaries seem to have an effect that functions in an opposite way. Lacking the ability to place himself within the border that runs around the map of Bacon County, Crews cannot move through the narrative accounts that reflect and discipline him. The recorded child’s imagination is repressed for a while; he can only report the series of losses that define his removal from home. In this space in the text the author and the “I” lose their focus and their topoi at once.¹⁹

In the “Springfield Section” of the text, Crews attempts to push the negative aspects of losing Bacon aside, but it is clear in those pages that outside of the boundary that defines his place, he has difficulty describing his relational life the way that he does within parts of the text that take place in Bacon. It is as though the Springfield Section does not fit into his text any more than his relational life fits into the Springfield Section. He first describes the loss of

¹⁹ Charles Taylor relegates the partitioning and localization of the human subject’s world to a Western phenomenon that “is a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation” (111). He theorizes that the realization of the “nature” of the subject as anchored to the surrounding region is not a universal one. The importance of bound, encompassing social worlds is not as relevant or widespread as modern, Western people would like to believe. He claims that many non-Western cultural subjects do not recognize localized boundaries as part of their lives, their selves, at least not in the way that they position themselves with “their heads [. . .] above their torsos” (111). Perhaps his claim is valid for some individuals, if only before they have felt the impact of the trauma of exile from relational locality. Looking into postcolonial studies, Taylor’s contentions seem to be far from accurate, especially if one considers the sheer amount of published material on the nature and consequences of cultural diaspora—the dispersal of people who may never return to their place, who belong to more than one place and maintain more than one “identity”—for individuals throughout the world over time. See Lynn Pan’s Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of Chinese Diaspora, Boston: Little Brown, 1990; Colin Galloway’s The Western Abenakis of Vermont, 1600-1800: War, Migration, and the Survival of Indian People, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990; Keya Ganguly’s Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood, Cultural Studies 6.1(1992): 25-50; and Homi K. Bhabha’s “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Nation and Narration, London: Routledge, 1990; all of which are cited and touched upon in James Clifford’s “Diasporas.”

narrative control—a reduction, a change in his young memory’s ability to create order, meaning, and detail for the scenes that compose his relational life to a mere “series of scenes, flashes of actions lit down to the most brutal detail under a blinding light” (130). This is how his memory seems to recall these six months. As the deracinated family celebrates their first experience with indoor plumbing, telephones, and electric lights, Crews notes that they mourn the loss of property that no outsider can take; the privacy of country life; the natural and comforting smells, sounds, and sights of the country; and the companionship of their animals. Yet hopelessly, Crews notes, “there was nothing to be done for all that, and everybody knew it” (132). In their new neighborhood they “felt like animals in a pen. It was, they (Baconians) say, no way for a man to live” (132). They become the beasts of burden, and Crews’s moral structure becomes inverted. While many friends and relatives from Bacon live in Jacksonville when the Crews family arrives, the only contact with them that Crews records is a phone call that his mother makes to secure a shotgun house in the city the moment they step off the bus. And everyone and everything in the new neighborhood is unfamiliar and imposing: “it seemed dreadfully unnatural to them to stand on their front porch and be able to talk to somebody else standing on *his* front porch” (132).

Crews also loses the company of Pascal, his friendship with Willalee, and the imaginative agency, discipline, and purpose that he maintained (and that maintained him) in Bacon. Rather than spend his afternoons dreaming under the family oak and creating stories from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue with Willalee, Crews wanders the streets with other children who are too young for school. Or

they spend their days “trying to find odd jobs or stealing or pressing flesh in unthinkably erotic games of our own devising inside the empty shotgun houses” (136-7). In this way the Springfield Section brings forth a loss of innocence since the new boundary not only lacks the old social controls and the activities that governed Bacon County but is in many ways non-existent.

The most poignant description of loss that connects to the idea of home place and narrative control occurs on the day that Crews gets his first job at the local butcher shop. On his second day of work, a man, a stranger, rushes into the store with a look of “raw, wild desperation” on his face. The stranger takes the knife from the butcher’s block and jams it into his chest in front of Crews. As he bleeds to death in front of several people, the stranger asks Crews why the owner ran out of the store to get the police. Crews explains that he does not think that people are allowed to kill themselves and tries to persuade the man to “just quit and go on home” (144). They speak of their common ties to Bacon County and the man tells Crews that he “mought know your people [. . .] It is some Crewses up around Harrikin I know” (143-4). Then, in a quiet and bemused voice the man tells Crews that he *has no home* so “the knife feels good” (144). Here for the first time in the text, as Crews describes watching the man take his final breath, he complicates and ultimately rejects the power of narrative to control the lives of desperate people in Jacksonville:

I knew it was hopeless. I could not have said it then, but I knew in my bones that he was caught in a life where the only thing left to do was what he was doing. He had told himself a story he believed, or somebody else

had told it to him, a story in which the next thing that happened—the only thing that could happen—was the knife. It was the next thing, the right thing, the only thing, and the knife felt good. If my life to that moment had taught me nothing else, it had made me understand exactly what he meant. Talking wasn't going to do any good. (144)

If Crews has any notion of where this “story” came from, he does not share it with his reader. Perhaps this narrative has such tremendous control over Crews because it came from a Bacon County mouth. Away from his place, the ideological mechanism of narrative, oral control fails Crews in the text because it seems to have failed the displaced stranger in matters of life and death.

The dying man faces a threat to his seemingly autonomous, last-chance decision when the storeowner threatens him with a repressive state apparatus, the police, which provokes the man to tap “the knife a little deeper” (143). The imaginary relation of people and narrative control developed through Bacon throughout the text fails in the real, urban relations in which the narrated Crews and the dying man are forced to live. The comfortable ideologies that Crews knew in Bacon cannot withstand the new material ideology. Jacksonville ideology requires that people from Bacon function as subjects of repressive state regimes rather than the ideological mores and cultural laws based in the land and the narratives that sustained them as subjects back home. As I explain early in this thesis, Bacon County citizens do not turn to the police—they maintain social control over one another with stories. The stranger is also following a narrative—one that contends that the displaced must die rather than let the police intervene.

In doing so, the stranger honors Bacon County's unwillingness to involve a "repressive state regime." If the strategies of discipline for diasporic subjects are always in tension with nation-state ideologies (Clifford 308), and in this case the tension is so great that it causes an irreparable loss of human life seems to inform Crews's life in Jacksonville and lay bare the oppressive paradox of Bacon's system of discipline when it confronts the outside world. .

Up to this point, we've seen how the shift in landscape forces a shift in ideology that is couched in loss in the narrative, but defining the loss that encompasses the Springfield Section as a diasporic experience must go beyond the claims above. James Clifford's piece "Diasporas" provides useful descriptions and explanations that demarcate the impact of the switch in actual experiences and narrative accounts of the relational lives of displaced subjects. While the term is most often used to signify the experience of immigrant or migrant peoples, at its core is the idea that diaspora functions as a form of exile that connects disparate communities of dispersed populations in a foreign space. In his play on the "routes" of "roots" as they are articulated by diasporic discourse, Clifford cites Paul Gilroy's "alternative spheres" to discuss "forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identification outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (308).²⁰ The term "diaspora" therefore signifies the political struggle to define a community in the face of displacement while it maintains a broader definition: "a history of

²⁰ The idea of "alternative spheres" arises in Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London: Hutchinson, 1987. In his text, Gilroy details the expressive forms of music in black settler communities in England to theorize cultural art as a defense mechanism against racial violence and to offer a thick description of capitalism and other networks of transnational connections (Clifford 315).

dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (Clifford 306-8).

Crews’s choice to remark/reclaim his place in the Springfield Section, if only for twenty pages and six months of his childhood, proves that this experience is highly relevant; he explicitly chose it as part of the highly selective “eternal return” of Crews (Derrida The Ear 45) that this text circumscribes. The narrative contrast that bombards the reader and forces her into an uncomfortable shift in diegetic movement allows her to acknowledge the culture-specific nature of storytelling in a particular place *and* time. Time in this biography invokes ideologies of the temporal 1940s rural landscape, the spatial time of childhood, and the linear time that informs narrative history and the daily lives of Crews and his other subjects. Diaspora is multiple and its implications in this text are clear: the reader finds the change in land to also be a change in subjects, narrative, reading, and text. This relates to the ability of spatial diaspora to change the nature of I-ness and the sense of personhood for the displaced subject.

If there is a collective life in Jacksonville, a history, a sense of time, Crews cannot locate them. In Bacon, the land and the seasons farm out the time of sharecroppers and their children: “capricious acts of Nature limit and furnish the boundaries around human existence” (Shelton “A Way” 99). Nature, or more specifically land, was the original object that Crews “awoke” to at the beginning of his account. Crews is still able to reflect on his rural life in a pleasant and nostalgic way, just as he recollects urban life as loss and desolation, because he

maintains his original, positive affiliation with Bacon despite the harsh difference that Jacksonville imposes on his life story. Even though the author Crews constructs these accounts from Jacksonville, the ironic locale of his adult life, he is still tied to Bacon as he pens its relational place in A Childhood. Further, Crews is not the only subject who creates and signs this text; both landscapes—Bacon and Jacksonville—inform it with their meanings and their reflective impact on the experience of the child subject and author subject.

Crews concludes the Springfield Section with the erasure of his stepfather, Pascal, from both his life and his text. Just after his family is evicted and transplanted to an identical shotgun house, Pascal begins arriving and sleeping over quite regularly. His behavior, “swooning and crooning along the sidewalks and at the bedroom windows of the Springfield Section and later rushing madly about, senseless and crazed,” Crews notes, is common fare for husbands once their wives have rushed from Bacon to Jacksonville to escape their violence and degradation (147). Throughout the text centered in Jacksonville, Crews often awakes to the sounds of yelling voices and smashing objects in the home until “finally the night came when not only was the fight different from any I had heard before, it was the worst” (147). After five hours of vocal explosions and “murderous murmuring,” the argument between his mother and Pascal ends and Pascal, now sober, creeps into Crews’s room. He leaves the door open, stands next to the bed, and refuses to make eye contact as he tells Crews, “I ain’t gone be by to see you no more [. . .] Cain’t [. . .] Have the law on me I do. You ma’s gittin a divorce. She got a peace bond on me now” (148). Crews is startled and

confused by this news. He had heard of divorce in Bacon but has no concept of the purpose of a peace bond or the law, and he can't conceive of why any of these strange notions will force his father away for good. Then, for the first time, just before Pascal escapes his life and his text forever, Crews learns that Pascal "never was your daddy, but I tried to be one to you [. . .] It just wasn't in me, though" (148). With this news Crews claims to "burn along all my nerves" and lose "the rest of what passed between us, lost it in the same way that I lost the fact that he was my stepfather [. . .] But I remember clearly how it all ended" (148-9). The confession concludes with the information that Pascal was in fact his father's brother, his uncle, until just after his father died. With this news, Crews can only think of his Uncle Alton and of his own brother. No part of this goodbye makes sense to Crews. To Crews's disbelief, Pascal tells him that they will never see each other again, and the fact that "he was as good as his word" teaches Crews "not to give a damn for what makes sense" (149). In Jacksonville, the male-identified, narrated Crews's own family husbandry explicitly dissolves as his father figure disappears, and since Crews is just a boy, he is not expected to "husband" the family. Pascal has failed to husband and in so doing, Pascal fails Crews as a father substitute.

In the culture of Bacon, a place where narrative seems to function as the foundation of some sense of selfhood for the child Crews, it is odd that no one tells Crews of Ray when he is a child. It seems that he must learn of the loss of husbandry in Jacksonville from Pascal in order for the metaphorical connection between father/author/place to stretch through all narrative sections of the text.

Perhaps, as Eakin finds in his reading of Kingston's The Woman Warrior, "the imposition of silence, the denial of name, is tantamount to the extinction of personality" (Fictions 257). Yet Ray is everywhere in this text, and Crews only claims that he tries to "find" him in the act of collecting for this text after he discovers that another father existed in Jacksonville. The "Springfield Section" and its records of loss reports of the absence of two fathers: the dead one that Crews is compelled to know/create through narrative as an adult (Ray) to know himself and the surrogate (Pascal) that he knows first-hand yet eventually brings to an end in the narrative. After this section, the narrating Crews seeks Pascal no more.

In a discussion of the crossing of physical boundary as a disjuncting of self and narrative boundary, it is fitting, then, that Crews rediscovers both of his father figures again for the sake of this text. He finds his biological father, Ray, in stories that come to him through "the mouths of more people than I could name" in Bacon (21) because he needs to know where and how his own life stories begin. He must find Pascal again so he knows how that part of the story ends or at least proceeds once he and his family move back home to Bacon in the next chapter. On a Saturday morning about twenty years after their goodbye, he literally finds Pascal again, "not far from where I lost him" in the Springfield Section of Jacksonville (149). They only meet for a moment and do not touch "not even to shake hands" (149). The contrast between the pleasant willingness of Bacon County people to offer the words and images that Crews needs to recreate Ray in his memory and the nervous silence that codifies the recreated

visit with Pascal shows that whatever lies outside the boundary of the narrating Crews's home place lacks both oral history and narrative motion. With no defined maps to circumscribe or be circumscribed by, the Springfield Section is the account of no place and no discernable ideology. It is simply the "other" with which Crews establishes a discrete sense of difference and distance from as both a rural child outsider and an urban adult abider. Stepping out of Bacon County helps Crews to better define it as a unique, idiosyncratic place. He needs to leave A Place in order to see it as different, as home.

The Imagination of the Rural Ethnographer

In the first pages of "Breaking Habits and Cultivating Home," an interlude in Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics that discusses ethnography as access, culture as cultivated, and performance as cultural awareness in process, Lesa Lockford notes Martin Heidegger's linguistic exploration of the words "culture" and "cultivation" and implies the implication of their origins in the verb 'to be.' In effect, "Heidegger's point is to argue that culture and being share a kind of linguistic bridge, an etymological heritage that suggests that the event of being is to cultivate, that the event of being is to construct culture" (77-8). Heidegger's etymological discovery also suggests that cultural cultivation is a constructive, linguistic act. The meanings of the words within Crews's written ethnography of Bacon County reclaim its soil, mark its subjects, and remark on the territories of being in place (Lockford 79).

The construction of culture in Bacon is a series of linguistic “performances” as they are the narrating Crews’s reenactments of remembered scenes that serve to educate his reader in the make-up of the place and stage a reenactment of Crews’s narrative origins.²¹ Unlike formal ethnography in which the researcher views and records the meanings and actions of speaking subjects, autoethnography takes the self as a subject and purports to record traces or constructions long past. All of Crews’s cultural recordings of the Bacon County he knew as a child stem from memories that he maps between 1940 and 1945; yet he does not construct the text proper until 1977. The thirty-year gap is complicated and informed by Crews’s outside experiences, especially his artistic life as a creative fiction writer and his professional life as student and professor. Yet, the way that he explains how a “boy who was raised in the rickets-and-hookworm belt of South Georgia and who moved nearly every year of his life from one framed-out piece of dirt to another [. . .] should grow up determined to be a writer” is one of many performances that Crews reenacts so that his reader will understand the place of his beginnings as it justifies his future (10).

Crews does not perform merely to illustrate his inspiration to become a novelist and life writer. He also acts out the performances that provide meaning and shape to the lives of his people. For them, “fabrication (was) a way of life.

²¹ In “Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida,” Joseph G. Kronick notes that Derrida’s *Glas*, *The Postcard*, and *Circumfession* show how the act of writing the life story begins “in an ‘external provocation’ and results in a counter-institution.” Yet, Derrida’s texts “do not merely impose themselves as authoritative but stage their own history or writing” (1001). Kronick uses Derrida’s texts to argue that this re-mapping while mapping is a type of transference: “Autobiography is put into motion by this trace of the other. Before ‘I am,’ the other is there” (1001). In *A Childhood*, as the narrating Crews pens his childhood, the narrated Crews and all of the voices that transverse both the child and the adult self are present in the mind and therefore in the text. Kronick argues that transference/translation happens “not only between text and interpreter but belongs to the text/figure” (100). The author is always more than just himself.

Making up stories, it seems to me now, was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it” (67). The culture of Bacon County took his hand at age five (the age of his “awakening”) and helped him make the first tentative steps toward a life “devoted primarily to men and women and children who never lived anywhere but in my imagination” (67). Crews simultaneously frames his textual, cultural performances and illustrates the types of actors involved in his culturally constructed imagination when he introduces his reader to the drama of a Sears, Roebuck Catalogue.

While many Bacon people associate this seasonal “Wish Book” with outhouse toilet paper, Crews believes that the “government ought to strike a medal for the Sears, Roebuck company for sending all those catalogues to farming families, for bringing all that color and all that mystery and all that beauty into the lives of country people” (64). His original fascination springs from the fact that the people featured in it are beautiful, flawless, whole; they appear so unlike anyone that Crews has ever seen in Bacon County. Just as soon as Crews perceives the difference between what he knows and what he sees on its pages, he decides that the catalogue is a lie. He knows that “under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world” (65). He also decides that all of the people in the catalogue must either be blood kin or know one another well enough to have trouble, violence, hatred, and love among them. This is where his own fictional stories begin, stories based on the landscape and patterns in the lives of people in his place.

The content of his Sears, Roebuck Catalogue stories as he performs them for the reader is telling. He opens the catalogue at random to a man in hunting attire, marks it with his finger, and turns again to a page filled with women in unstained “step-ins.” He and Willalee decide that one of the women is the hunter’s child, and Crews flips again and finds a man in a starched suit. Crews’s play proceeds as follows:

This boy right here is seeing that girl back there, the one in her step-ins, and she is the youngun of him back there, and them shotguns behind’m belong to him, and he ain’t happy [. . .] That gal is the only youngun the feller in the jacket’s got, and he loves her cause she is a sweet child. He don’t want her fooling with the sorry man in that suit. He’s so sorry he done got himself in trouble with the law [. . .] He’ll steal anything he can put his hand to [. . .] He’ll steal your hog, or he’ll steal your cow out of your field [. . .] That suit [. . .] done turned that young girl’s head. Daddy always says if you give a man a white shirt and a tie and a suit of clothes, you can find out real quick how sorry he is. Daddy says it’s the quickest way to find out. (66)

Before Crews’s story is over, the man in hunting attire loads his gun with buckshot and stops his daughter from fooling around the easy way. Other models in the magazine play the roles of the hunter’s “kin people,” and they make sure that the sheriff does not find out about the murder. Before dinner that day, “the entire Wish Book was filled with feuds of every kind and violence, maimings, and

all the other vicious happenings of the world” (67), or at least the world that Crews and Willalee know.

Presented with the imaginary discourse of a seemingly flawless world, Crews’s instinct is to use it to create a new catalogue that matches the landscape of his life. He imposes on this unknown or imaginary world the codes and mores of his known world of Bacon County. Crews discovers the world as a place of violence and of partial people, and he learns to articulate his internalization of the conditions of his world at the young age of five. As a writer, the adult Crews seems to write the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue over and over again. In the introduction to Classic Crews, an anthology with A Childhood at its fore, he comments on the feelings of authorial agency that the catalogue conjured up in his early years:

I had never found anything before nor have I found anything since that gave me such an overwhelming sense of well-being and profound power. Because no matter what else the storyteller may or may not be, inside the boundaries of his story he is omniscient and omnipotent, godlike. I was seduced to the making of worlds that had never existed, and seduced also to contriving a tissue of lies that was—at least to me—truer than anything that had ever happened. (11)

But is his Sears, Roebuck performance based on a world that “never existed” or is it based on the lives and stories that originate in and personify the culture of Bacon? Throughout Crews’s performance, the reader comes to realize that the world he creates in his play is strikingly similar to the world that he records and

re-imagines in A Childhood. Crews colors the culture of Bacon with broken skulls (25), violence and murder among kin folk (26-28, 45), sexual couplings of all kinds (19, 29), and deathly illnesses (29-30) by the end of the first chapter. The reader might describe A Childhood the same way that Crews describes the catalogue: “blood! God, was there an extraordinary amount of blood splashed all over those pages” (11). Obviously, both texts are developed by Crews’s imagination; yet, a shared understanding of the body and community complacency towards and acceptance of violence force Crews to see the entire world as a physically marred and ugly place. He transforms what might be a competing discourse into the familiar in the Sears, Roebuck world to reinforce what the narrated Crews condones as “true.”

While A Childhood is largely shaped by the author’s imagination, there are many individual and community forces at work on the mind of both the child performer and the adult director. As I’ve tried to show, this text is more a construction of/by the culture of one place than the “identity” of one person. There is an oral culture at work behind the scenes that prefigures the meaning and content of Crews’s drama before he knows how to write it down. A look into the blending of dramas told by others bound to this place also provides insight into the idea that “a place takes on living characteristics, can have a biography, in the imagination not of a single man or woman but only in the minds of many men and women over many generations” (Papovich 28). And as seen with the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue, it seems that alien material commodities engender both oral culture and imagination. In this way the text is also constrained by the social

conditions that inform and produce the actions, performances, and stories of rural people. The catalogue provides raw materials for Crews, but it is up to him to provide the narrative and the motivations—so he provides the only ones he knows.

There is no one better able to perform dramas of poverty, soil, violence, and oral history than the ex-slave. Willalee's grandmother, Auntie, is an important figure in the text because she provides Crews with a long oral history that functions to shape and solidify the cultural history in which A Childhood is rooted. Early in the text Auntie teaches Crews to bury the eyes of the possum he eats out of respect for the animal and for fear that it will forever look for him if he does not return its sight to the ground (71-73). Later, when Crews is bedridden with infantile paralysis, Auntie comes to keep him company with her stories. While he is held by the "sheer wisdom and terror" of adult narrative that forces him to see that his situation is not as bad as some, he learns that she "belonged to the children" (91) in some strange way. She is too fantastic for the adult world, and her animal stories, "full of the most fantastic [. . .] and marvelous comments upon the way of the world and all things in it, whether of the earth or air" (91), keep Crews company for hours while the rest of the family sleeps.

One night she tells Crews of an encounter with a snake that she had as a young girl. Her snake speaks and has the "bluest eyes [. . .] An marsah had the bluest eyes and the snake with marsah's head on it had them eyes and them eyes looked at me" (92). The snake, which seems embodied by her owner, uses his blue-eyed gaze to force her to share her "vittles" with him nightly. At this point

in her performance Crews clamors for the details; “Details were everything,” he reflects (92). She commences and describes how she shares all of her food with the snake until she realizes that she has lost a lot of weight. She asks her Uncle Ham about her strange situation, and he tells her that it is not uncommon for poor little girls to get sick and “lose flesh” because they share “them vittles they’d taken and given her” (93). Uncle Ham tells her a story about another little girl who’s daddy kills the snake. It ends, “His gul was dead fore he could git her back to the house” (93). In Auntie’s story she decides that the only way for her to defeat the snake is to “leave that snake in the ditch,” to stop feeding it so that it will go away (93). In the realm of this strange story, this seems to work, and Auntie moves on to more stories about the harm that snakes can do to people.

While the phallic image of the snake with blue eyes and the overtones of master-slave rape and submission in sharing “the vittles” are difficult to ignore, it also seems that Auntie performs this drama to teach Crews to complicate the nature of telling a story of the self rather than to relinquish a difficult past. Like the performance of the Sears, Roebuck world (and the world of the text A Childhood) it teaches the reader that the culture of Bacon County creates an alternate world through language. In Fictions in Autobiography, Paul John Eakin uses the self-stories of John-Paul Sarte, Mary McCarthy, and Henry James to show that autobiographers reveal “the part of fiction in the self and its story in language which they set before the world [. . .] the autobiographical act is deliberately presented as but the latest instance of an inveterate practice of self-invention which is traced to a determining set of biographical circumstances”

(182). Auntie's stories also function this way. Her predilection with snakes and her forceful master in this strange tale is arguably the fictive manifestation of a selfhood based in the biographical conditions of slavery and violent acts of rape. Her narratives speak the truth of her place in a hierarchy and her treatment by white people in a way that mystifies and engages her five-year-old friend. All of the active members of Auntie's oral text—she, Crews, and the reader—must understand the “fictive nature of selfhood” as one kind of biographical fact (Eakin 182). As a primary “teller” in Crews's text, she compels and trains him to share his “selves” by using the narrative strategies of his culture. In the case of Bacon County, “fabrication became a way of life” (67). Crews's text takes on the narrative of Auntie's world according to the definition that Crews himself offers.

Auntie's is a world that is “aberrant and full of shadows, but she understood the aberrations and the shadows, knew all about them and never seemed to find it strange that so little of her world was what it appeared to be” (94). As Louis Renza contends in “The Veto of the Imagination,” “[. . .] in selecting, ordering, and integrating the writer's lived experiences according to its own teleological demands, the autobiographical narrative is beholden to certain imperatives of imaginative discourse” (269). In order to express the “truth” of her past to Crews, Auntie must adopt strategies for her imaginative discourses that she learned from other storytellers. In doing so, she teaches Crews to do the same for his yet unnamed, unknown reader. While neither Crews nor the reader can know how Auntie's world really was, how it appeared to be, or how her narrative departs from the touchstone of the since dissolved place and time of slavery, both

can understand that Auntie does not find her narratives “strange” because they transcend the limitation of reporting “truths” and take on an imaginative strategy that supplants the telling of fragmented memories of the past. The written performance of Auntie’s oral performance, perhaps, reveals Crews’s own “ironic” or experimental attempts to update his own past with an imaginative, narrative project of the present (Renza 270). His project, like Aunties, is not contingent upon the actual narratives that take imaginative leaps away from the factual.

This forces me to question the meaning of the southern dialect featured in the discussion above that Crews re-constructs for the performances as well. The narrating Crews is faced with the task of making his life stories in the present “sound” the way that they did in the past for his reader. Crews refers to the act of recreating and mimicking the dialect as an attempt to make his people speak “with Georgia in their mouths” (Bledsoe “Introduction” 14). And indeed, Crews seems to understand and employ a range of southern dialects. Yet, his present “selves” neither speak nor write the way that Bacon does; A Childhood is written in the language of Crews’s narrative present except when he quotes the people, like Auntie, of his now-departed place (including his childhood self) or displays himself as a childhood mimic who sermonizes like the county preacher (74-5) and, like his father, threatens others with such phrases as “I’m gone have to cut you like a shoat hog” (62). Renza views the immediately accessible narrative (the final text that the reader interprets) as “the writer’s de facto attempt to elucidate his present rather than his past” (271). The inconsistent nature of the dialects (past and present) in this text shows that the creation of a reflective past

relies heavily on the insignification in the Crews's present. Does this mean that it is likely that the narratives are inconsistently over-determined by the present as well? I am convinced that it does. Yet, Renza's theory of imagination in autobiography reminds that since the author is "mentally closer to his past than the reader," he knows how to "best appreciate its anxious complication of his present narrative and vice versa; the reader can only 'suspect' this temporal dialect" (271).

The narrative performances of Auntie and of young Crews would have no life without a "drama of self-cognition" in the present (272). These dramas function to inform the reader not just of Crews's narrative beginnings but also of a constructed culture of Bacon, a culture cultivated by the verbal performances of its many members. Fictive or not, the reader sees that even in the writing of the text proper, an act that takes place many years beyond Bacon has faded into the distance of the author's life, Crews cannot escape Bacon's modes of narrative performance. In order to give meaning to past events, Crews re-writes narratives that have already come and gone. He acknowledges that these narratives may appear to many the way that Auntie's past experience as a slave appears to him, "aberrant and full of shadows" (94). Crews negotiates the problematic nature of reconstructing experience as Auntie reconstructs hers: "Fantasy might not be the truth as the world counts it, but what was truth when fantasy meant survival?" (98). He is aware of the possible difference between the time, place, and "truth" of performance in a Sears, Roebuck text or an Auntie text and his author's own text A Childhood. The written awareness of a "truth as the world counts it"

signifies Crews's consciousness of his writing from one time and place as he
recollects another. While Crews cannot claim the certifiable nature of any past
occurrence directly in this text, since his reader cannot witness them first-hand, he
is the cultivator of the narrative culture of Bacon County in representing his
present readings of Bacon's stories.

CONCLUSIONS

The Body in the Story of a Relational Life

As the author of this text, Harry Crews not only draws a narrative map that reveals the social, political, and cultural constraints of an impoverished and desperate place and time, he also etches that time and place, his version of Bacon County, Georgia, as the very meanings of his childhood life stories. Again, the reader is forced to interrogate aspects of Crews's narrated self with which he is not proud. Reading his life writing, a la Derrida, the reader can see that the meaning of Crews's selves in relation to his place is always in process, in a state of becoming, and that author, reader, and text maintain but a fluid boundary that separates fiction from fact. Foucault's concepts of discipline further illuminate the diegetic shift from Bacon to the "Springfield Section," in which Crews can only actualize self-knowledge and social knowledge of Bacon as he shifts through multiple and dispersed methods and materials of another place. Yet, many questions remain, the most difficult to answer of which is: through the mapping of Bacon and of Crews's construction of it, is his compilation of selves discovered or even made visible in the text? In other words, how does the map of A Place render bodily identity? Is there a bodily appeal to the authority of cultural experience made in this text, and how does Crews reflect on himself as a text and a subject of the context of A Place? In order to explore whether or not the visibility of a subject is possible, the reader must return to the appearance of

bodies in the text as tropes for understanding self in place.²² But this time the reader cannot simply return, say, to the body of the dead father or to the testicles that greet the reader at the text's fore. She must interrogate the body of the child as it connects to the father. Crews concludes his text with a scene that harkens back to the opening tryst on the Tamiami Trail.

Crews does not repeat his father's actions exactly—though the parallels resonate and reinforce the interplay between themes of landscape, husbandry, morality, and idiosyncratic familial tradition. In fact, since he found out who his father was just a few months prior to his own first sexual experience, it is quite likely that he knew nothing of the Seminole girl, at least as far as narrative continuity is concerned. While the record of his first sexual encounter provides a frame for Crews's relational life (sins of the father of page one are passed down to the child who never knew him through the final pages), Crews does not reflect much on his own body in his description of the sexual encounter, at least not nearly as much as he reflects on his father's body. He only shamefully says of himself, "I got a little girl down on the back porch of the church [. . .] She was crying because not only had I ripped her little cotton drawers, but I had thrown them in the yard and she didn't know what she was going to tell her mama" (168). He comments mostly on the social nature of the sexual situation, the cultural expectations and pressures for his six-year-old self to "get myself some" even though "I didn't want any" (166). This claim mirrors his reflection on his father's sexual experience in the swamp: "He had not wanted her, but they had been in the

²² As Susanna Egan contends in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, it seems that "making one's self visible or mapping identity are not only figures of speech but also tropes for recovery of understanding, which is always elusive" (226).

swamp for three years [. . .] So since he could not have what he wanted, he tried to want what he could have” (20).

Crews’s constructed narratives that describe the subjection of the Seminole girl and the girl on the porch of the church do not beg sentimental or nostalgic reactions of the reader. They serve to reinforce the sad and desperate notion that being a self, an “I,” in Crews’s time and place means dealing with a lack of options, internalizing violence “out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives” (54). Crews attempts to curb skepticism that necessarily surrounds a place that is brutal and violent toward its women: “An unflattering way to refer to women, God knows, but then those were unflattering times” (29), just as he sometimes laments the fact that “Bacon County is my home place, and I’ve had to make do with it [. . .] all its loveliness and all its ugliness” (31). This, of course, is not proper justification for the treatment of women in this text. Violence toward women in this place must be treated critically and with the awareness that a kinder, simpler place would yield a different story, perhaps a story that would allow space for women to have and maintain agency. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case in Crews’s Bacon County. Like Crews, the reader is left to dislike and problematize the cultural expectation of a place in which ““It always comes a time in a man’s life when he’s got to do it (have sex) [. . .] it’s sure as death”” (112).

Crews’s childhood body is highly visible in other places in the text; yet, all of these spots describe the pain, torture, and mutilation that his body undergoes and the social isolation that he feels because of it. Crews’s body image is

dynamically based on social experience, and awareness of his bodily fragmentation is both part of his consciousness and detrimental to his child sense of self.²³ He carefully describes “the first real illness” of his life (82), an exotic and mysterious ailment that that the doctors believe is infantile paralysis because of his burning fever and the way that his legs become knotted and his heels to draw up to “the cheeks of my buttocks” (85). The illness lasts for almost two months, and while the “pain was enough to make me chew my lips and the inside of my mouth,” the shame and rejection that he feels because his body looks this way hurts him much more:

Right there, as a child, I got to the bottom of what it means to be lost, what it means to be rejected by everybody (if they had not rejected me, why was I smothered in shame every time they looked at me?) and everything you ever thought would save you. And there were long days when I wondered why I did not die, how I could go on mindlessly living like a mule or a cow when God had obviously forsaken me. But if I was never able to accept my affliction, I was able to bear it and finally to accept the good-natured brutality and savagery in the eyes of those who came to wish me well. (91)

Crews’s sick body is on display for all of the members of Bacon County and for the reader. His body is, after all, an index to the morality of his parents and himself. The “great parade” of community members seems to arrive not because they want to “wish him well” but because they want to “stare at (his) rigid legs”

²³ In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Paul John Eakin extensively discusses how “developments in brain science pioneered by Edelman, Rosenfield, and others point to the self-referential nature of all bodily experience” (29).

(87). He deplores their actions and their curiosity—"I knew that they were staring with unseemly intensity at my legs, that they wanted most of all to touch them, and I hated it and dreaded it and was humiliated by it"—because it makes him so different from the people of his place (87).

In forming his sense of self in light of this illness, Crews draws on the model of bodily identity that the culture of Bacon prescribes, and for the first time he "felt how lonely and savage it was to be a freak" (87). Yet, Crews does not leave the reader with a choice as to whether or not they should stare. He displays his sick body willingly and forces the reader to see it and perhaps even to draw a comparison of the moral implications of his father's sick body after he lost a testicle, became a "freak," and worked himself to death in the land to cancel out the violent act of "crippled pleasure of that night so many months before under the palm-thatched chickee with the Seminole girl" (39). The intersubjective perspective, "the need for *mutual* recognition, the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other," implies that Crews and the reader need to recognize the other as a separate person who is like him/her yet distinct (Benjamin 23).²⁴ He and his father are both "freaks," the entire county is studded with "freaks," for the landscape is a brutal one. While the reader may find that the difference between herself and Crews/the father is quite real and constructed by the knowledge and power of sight, the "conventional boundaries" (Jeffrey 67)

²⁴ Jessica Benjamin's description of this often overlooked theory of the self based on mutual recognition appears in her text *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, New York: Pantheon, 1988, 19-23, and is quoted in Egan's *Mirror Talk* 8. Crews's inclusion and intricate description of the social reflection of the nature of his sick body are clearly important parts of how he views himself and his father and how he wants the reader to see them (guilty, violent, "bad," but real) both if she is to understand the place of Bacon and his place as a spectacle in it.

do not hold in Bacon County. Perhaps by making the reader come to terms with so many different types of social marginality that are part of rural life Crews establishes differences and freakish distance that separate the people of Bacon, morally and physically, from the world of the reader.²⁵

As a feminist and a cultural critic, I must judge the narrated bodies of Crews and his father as “guilty.” My reader must also view their actions on women and their punishments by the land to understand that their seeming powerlessness and pain still has a clear and legitimate voice, whereas the women that they act upon do not. While neither sex act is forced, Crews’s narrating voice does not afford a single word from either woman. As Fetterly, notes, “Powerlessness is the subject and powerless the experience, the design insists that (male characters) speak for us all” (xiii). As a member of the once removed jury, the female reader can take Crews’s confessions to task to expose the workings of Bacon County so that sexist systems “become not only subject to discussion, but even to change” (Millett 58). Moreover, I can penetrate this “closed system” (Fetterly xx) from the outside by playing with the textuality and linguistic bridges from an empowered point of view to display and tease out Bacon’s plights with metaphors that show how this text is an interplay that occurs between multiple texts. I use Crews’s language to interrogate what it means to be the “I” (male,

²⁵ David K. Jeffrey unpacks Crews’s descriptions of the fragmented bodies of Bacon people as simply the result of accidents based on violence and human error. He states, “These misfortunes leave their victims deformed but not abnormal, and the distinction is important because it points to a difference in kind, not degree. Some human agency bears responsibility for the scars on the other people Crews describe(s) [. . .] as Crews himself indicate(s), his own early misfortunes led him across the conventional boundaries separating freaks and normals, leading him thereafter to sympathize and to identify more completely with freaks than normals” (69). Further, since his father Ray is also a “freak,” at least as far as his series of illnesses are concerned, Crews identifies with his father through mutual losses in the body. Identification with and sympathy for bodily fragmentation is a large part of Crews’s authorship beyond this text as well.

speaking, guilty) and not be the “I” (female, silent, subjected) in the Bacon County of Crews’s Childhood. In using that language, I, a female reader, speak and master his detached and brutal metaphors with the awareness that Crews is self-consciously punished for his behavior. He reenacts his punishment and forces the reader to face a prescribed web of cultural inheritance, a pattern of violence and subjection that theorizes the body with cultural specificity.

An important part of his description of both his experience with infantile paralysis and his next major ailment, the scalding of two-thirds of his body during a game of pop-the-whip in which he is sent flying into a scalding pot of water that they use to boil hogs (118-9), are the traces that still mark him as an adult writing this text. Crews uses the leftover outlines of the “puckered and discolored” scars of his burns (119) and the “dimpled, wrinkled skin” (108) of his once-paralyzed legs as sources of authorial credibility or as ways to get back to his real father, who Crews knew lived in a child body that was plagued by “rheumatic fever,” “a leaking heart,” and who died as a young adult of a massive heat attack. Yet, no matter how the reader links both sex and sickness of father and son, they function as metaphors and structuring devices of this text, metaphors that bid to flesh out Crews’s selves by bringing him back to his father. It seems that his many descriptions of suffering bodies throughout the text serve to reclaim the privileged Baconian view he has of his place by suffering though it again and inviting the reader to suffer with him. The body rooted in the suffering and the implications of a brutal, subjugating, all-defining landscape permeate and organize this book—

from father's Swamp sex that engenders this text as a "miracle" to the recorded narrative of Crews's back porch sex that confirms it as such.

And in the end, it is no accident that the body rooted in place and subjected to narrative control rises once again. Crews prefaces the record of his first sexual experience by explicitly comparing the mystery of "little girls" to the mystery of God. While the connection fits well within the trajectory of the narrative—Crews "got a little girl down on the dark back porch of the church, delirious, full of God and raging" (168)—the comment that comes just before his account of the tryst takes the reader back to Ray. Crews writes of his reflections on the sermon the night he loses his virginity:

With a God like that on one side and a hell like that on the other, it was enough to make a little boy aware of his loosening bowels, but even when I realized, I didn't care. What was filling my shoes compared to a God who might boil me *forever* (a word and a condition I could not imagine)? Worse, he was going to do it for reasons of love. He had—the evangelist said—sent His only son to be beaten with brambles and given vinegar to drink and finally even nailed to a tree for reasons of love [. . .] For my part it was a great relief, getting on the right side of God and little girls all in the same hour. (168)

Here the reader must ask, is Crews really writing of the side of God or the side of his own father? The return of a phrase provided by the man from the gas station who first told Crews "It'll take a lot of doing, son, to fill your daddy's shoes" (35) is an obvious indicator that the reader ends where she begins, looking for Ray

Crews in the mouths, the oral tradition, of Bacon County, Georgia. What is more, Crews also takes her back to the tree under which Crews “awakened” to his own narrative (58) and to the sexual encounters that make his story possible and their cross-generational stories strikingly similar. Perhaps Crews is asking the reader to recognize that he was sent forth from father Ray to have his body beaten and abused “for reasons of love,” love for the place, for the generations that this text serves to preserve and violently, brutally represent.

The night he has sex, and throughout the next three seasons of the year, Crews sleeps “the sleep of one who is at peace with the world” (168). He rests easy because he believes that the sex act gets him “on the right side of God and little girls all in the same hour” (168). Yet in the summer, he begins returning unconsciously to the landscape for directions. He sleepwalks into the yard and the fields because, he believes, he has failed to tell anyone of his confusing conquest. Unacknowledged guilt for his violence toward the girl informs his quest for confirmation: “I don’t know why I wanted to tell a grownup, maybe only to have what I had done confirmed as fine” (168). He is compelled to find a confidant, an older man to decipher the moral implications of his act, one who will tell him whether or not “the girl had canceled out God” (169). So, he confides in Mr. Willis, an old tenant farmer who took Pascal’s place on the land after the divorce, on a ride into town. After his “slow and tortuous” confession, Mr. Willis sighs and tells Crews “God an girls is just like farmin. You cain’t ever git finished. Take sumpin out of the ground and it’s time to put sumpin in again. Soon’s you find out you ain’t never gone git finished, you don’t have to hurry or

worry [. . .] If the grass is growing or *not* growing ain't sumpin a reasonable man oughta worry about. The grass is *gone* grow" (169). Crews does not know how to respond to this, so he says "It's gone take a long time to get where we going," to which Mr. Willis replies, "Oh, it *always* takes a long time to git where you going" (169).

It seems that the sexual act that, according to the narrative pattern, takes him back to his father's violence toward women also moves him forward and propels him toward yet another father figure. Mr. Willis's girls/God/farming analogy serves to reinscribe the act of writing the self as a process that indicates that Crews can never finish. The narrative that rests behind his signature and between the covers of his work is a product unto itself, but it is not a complete product of the self. The act of being an *I* in Bacon is an act of becoming based in the cycles of the land, of rooting and re-rooting constructions, of subjecting and being subjected, of letting go of the anxiety that surrounds either the desire for completeness or full erasure of the subject.

Crews's narrative "reality" opens and closes in a way that creates the appearance of an ordered whole but one that is never complete. If the written connections between father and son in the beginning and the end are so many that the reader must ask, how can this text be accurate? The answer is, it can't. Works of biography or fiction or poetry or any other genre are all always first works of art that cannot maintain a promise of "pure" recollection or recreation in the midst of the infidelity of language. Autobiographical "truth" as veracity is arguably impossible. And Crews effectively illustrates how the act of writing

itself divides the “I” so many times that no text can promise to construct a “true” image of a whole subject.²⁶

In the end, it seems that Crews reflects on his childhood self as a text of lost place, a place of lost and multiple identities. While he tries to get back to Ray and to Bacon by repeating the actions of the father, the only father/place that he can discover are creations, narrative copies (oral or psychological) that he copies and willingly (and perhaps guiltily) displays to the reader as a nebulous affirmation of his sense of being an I in a time and a place that is forever fading. And yet, the fact that the place is literally gone does not seem to matter. If Crews imparts the story of a subject formed in a distant past, he also creates and give life to a complex subject and describes anew a productive landscape.

Eakin concludes his Fictions in Autobiography: “Whether the self [. . .] is literally dis-covered, made ‘visible’ in autobiography, or is only invented by it as a signature, a kind of writing, is beyond our knowing, for knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language” (278). Since the practice of language is what maintains and upholds the people of Bacon, the child-selves of the author, and the reader’s understanding of the text, there can never be any accurate or “appropriate” knowledge of the self—there will only be the words that can never completely clarify the meaning of a self or a series of selves. But from the words that comprise Crews’s narrative spring some understanding of the social and cultural nature of the intersubjective places and characters that beg mutual

²⁶ In textual works of art, “the honest truth, insofar as this suggests absolute fidelity to historical fact, is inaccessible; the minute you begin to write it you may try to write it well, and writing well is an activity which has no simple relation to truth. For memory cannot do the necessary work independent of fantasy; and if it tries, it will be a dull report indeed” (Kermode 36).

recognition. Just as Crews searches for a sense of self by consistently returning to his father, the reader comes to an understanding of the meaning of a place by briefly inhabiting Bacon County. But if Crews never explicitly claims the text or the place as his own, he nevertheless establishes a cultural genealogy through his text, disseminating his own familial inheritance and unique code of cultural values through his readership.

If Crews maps a Bacon County that never existed, or a place that exists “nowhere but in memory” (31), at least he leaves the reader with a legend and a moral compass that belong to and may only be understood by the people who “had to make do with it” (31). Indeed, the reader may feel violently opposed to both the place and the narrating “I,” to the problematic, male-centered values that the text seems to condone. When she ascribes her value system, her own moral compass to the text, the experience of reading A Childhood is both violent and uncomfortable. Yet, Crews’s text is an inscription, a key to understanding how he reads his childhood just as it is a device that directs understanding, a range or scope that aligns “good” and “sorry” with the crops that rest beneath the Earth. His Bacon County has a formative effect, and he passes the meaning of growth or coming into selves in a harsh place on to the reader. A Childhood: The Biography of a Place is a series of understandings charted by Crews that may not have even been there, but here they are, and they live on into the future through the text and its reader. Crews leaves the reader with a scene of copulation, and he and the little girl he first gets “it” from are not alone. The reader is there on the back porch of the church with them, and she opens her ear to Crews’s tellings, to his

fictions of Bacon County, to the violent and forced dissemination of “the search for those six years” (22) through a landscape that is not barren. Unlike the Seminole or the little girl, or Crews or Ray, the reader has the choice of whether or not she will subject herself to Crews’s version of Bacon’s legend of landscape, husbandry, morality, and idiosyncratic familial tradition. Though if she does, she conceives an understanding of the I-forming characteristics of a place, no matter how harsh, uncomfortable, or misogynistic they might be, in the narrative construction of a subject.

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