THE GROTESQUE BODY AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE IN HARRY CREWS’S

NAKED IN GARDEN HILLS

by

MARTIN HOLLAND

(Under the Direction of John Lowe)

ABSTRACT

This project aims to offer a reading of the grotesque bodies that appear in Harry Crews’s

Naked in Garden Hills through insights offered by Mikhail Bakhtin in Rabelais and His World.

In this paper, I link the performances of the book’s unusual bodies to the socioeconomic

narrative that runs throughout Crews’s novel. I give some information on the novel’s historical

and geographical backdrop. I claim that Crews’s treatment of the grotesque ultimately points

toward the economic regeneration of the town of Garden Hills that a new emphasis on tourism

brings. This argument differs from previous readings of Naked in Garden Hills that highlight

modern malaises, the unhappiness of the town’s citizens, and the internal deformities that the

novel’s unusual bodies can signify.

INDEX WORDS: Harry Crews, Naked in Garden Hills, Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His

World, grotesque realism, the grotesque body, social change, economic

change, tourism, phosphates, Polk County, Florida.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The primary plotline of Harry Crews’s *Naked in Garden Hills* tells a fairly simple story. At some point after the conclusion of Florida’s “land boom,” Jack O’Boylan purchases a section of land named “Garden Hills” (Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* 10). O’Boylan then proceeds to place “the largest phosphate mining plant in the world” in the area (11). In order to house his workers and support his enterprise, O’Boylan eventually arranges for the construction of “the town of Garden Hills” (15). However, the mining operation ultimately runs out of steam; suddenly, “one morning at sunrise, an awful silence fell” over the town and workers “stared in disbelief at the dead conveyor belts and the frozen grinders” (16). Garden Hills consequently becomes “a ruin” (Crews, “Interview with Harry Crews” 46). Later, Dolly, a former “Phosphate Queen,” brings tourism to the town through “DOLLY’S A GO-GO” and a “park” where visitors can camp and observe the town (Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* 95, 210, 106).¹ The book’s final pages witness the chief “tourist trap” at the epicenter of Garden Hills’s revitalized economy kicking into high gear as a naked Fat Man enters a “cage” where he is to eat a large quantity of food while suspended above a crowd (201, 211). Consequently, at a basic level, *Naked in Garden Hills* pivots around a progression from the manufacturing of raw materials to tourism. As the book develops, Garden Hills transforms from a mining town to a massive roadside attraction. The novel’s most prominent problems circle around the vacuum that the departure of a manufacturing industry generates, and the climax of the book arrives when the town’s new service-based enterprise reaches its fullest expression. In this way, while the novel certainly
features a number of interpersonal conflicts, its overarching narrative is primarily economic in nature.\textsuperscript{2}

However, despite its broad economic preoccupations, \textit{Naked in Garden Hills} does not always foreground the economic forces that help to shape its plot; overt discussions of class, property ownership, and socioeconomic evolution, for example, do not typically dominate the surface of the book’s narrative. Rather, throughout much of its duration, the novel seems to chiefly foreground unusual human bodies. From its first chapter through its last page, \textit{Naked in Garden Hills} overflows with images of exaggerated, oddly formed, animalistic, excessively or strangely sexualized, grotesque, damaged, or otherwise atypical or remarkable bodies. The book’s opening sequence, for example, introduces Jester, a man small enough to fit into a “green silk suit” that is “the size of a child’s Halloween costume” (4). The first paragraph of the following chapter highlights Fat Man’s extreme obesity by noting that he carries “five hundred and seventy-eight pounds” in a “five feet tall” frame (19). The succeeding chapter shows Lucy, Jester’s lover, performing an “act” in which “she smoked a cigarette with her vagina” in front of a crowd (56, 57). Later sections treat Dolly as chiefly defined by her body’s sexual capacity; the book’s sixth chapter, for example, presents her “maidenhead,” which is “thickening,” as the key to her fate (94). While they may not always play a clear part in driving the novel’s plot, such remarkable bodies do certainly demand attention. Indeed, throughout much of the book, grotesque and strange bodies almost seem to completely fill the reader’s field of vision. Consequently, these unusual bodies frequently overshadow the economic forces that shape and steer the narrative arcs at the center of the novel’s plot.\textsuperscript{3}

As cornerstones of the same novel, economic change and strange bodies might seem mismatched. However, these two pillars of \textit{Naked in Garden Hills} do intersect in significant
ways and at key moments. Lucy’s “job,” for example, is part of a “circus sideshow” and consequently closely linked to tourism (174). Garden Hills’s new tourist industry only reaches its consummate form when the “nakedness” of Fat Man’s body is put on display (211). The fate of Dolly’s “maidenhead” receives a great deal of attention as she begins to take over Fat Man’s role as the chief leader of Garden Hills (156). Consequently, while the socioeconomic and corporeal threads that run throughout the book may at first appear wholly divergent, these two sides of the novel do in fact exist in a sort of symbiotic relationship with each other.

A handful of critics have pointed toward the fact that *Naked in Garden Hills* simultaneously foregrounds both grotesque bodies and economic change. David K. Jeffrey, for example, observes that the book “traces the transference of power in and control over the world of Garden Hills from Fat man to Dolly” and that Dolly’s financial strength “enables her to create a kind of Freak Fair” (74, 75). Along similar lines, in “Harry Crews on the American Dream,” Gary L. Long and Larry W. DeBord note that “Dolly successfully transforms the factory into a go-go and Garden Hills into a sideshow of freaks” (49-50). Later in the same article, Long and DeBord also particularly emphasize the importance of Fat Man’s status as “a freak” in the role that he plays in Dolly’s enterprise (“Harry Crews on the American Dream” 50). Frank W. Shelton reads Fat Man’s extreme body as a reflection of his “entrapment” in the decayed and abandoned world of Garden Hills and in his own personal failings (103). In “Naked Americans: Violence in the Work of Harry Crews,” Gary L. Long claims, for example, that Dolly’s ability “to take control of Garden Hills” relies on the readiness of the “tourists” that flock to the town “to pay to look through a telescope at a fat man” (122). Later in the same article, Long also notes that visitors to the town are “witness and accomplice to Dolly’s triumph, to Fat Man’s humiliation as an attraction in a sideshow of freaks” (In “Naked Americans: Violence in the
Work of Harry Crews” 122). However, within each of these articles, the entanglement of the grotesque and socioeconomic change in *Naked in Garden Hills* does not serve as the leading concern.

In “Agrarian Nightmare: Harry Crews’s Dark Vision in *Naked in Garden Hills*,” Jeff Abernathy offers a more extended engagement with the interconnected operations of the body and economic change in *Naked in Garden Hills*. He highlights, for example, the fact that “Dolly fills the vacuum left by Jack O’Boylan” and “determines that tourism is the future and it is only as freaks that the residents will have economic value” (72). Abernathy also foregrounds the transfer of power between Dolly and Fat Man and the fact that “Fat Man becomes the main attraction” at the book’s end (77). Abernathy’s overarching argument concerns Harry Crews’s and *Naked in Garden Hills*’s relationships with the conservative social views espoused by Andrew Lytle and the “Agrarians” (68). For Abernathy, some features of the novel harmonize easily with Agrarian positions, such as the connections it draws between “grotesques” and “an industrial New South” (68). However, Abernathy also asserts that Crews, unlike the Agrarians, “sees no way past the depravities of modern culture” and consequently “must end with ambivalence” (68, 75). Accordingly, in Abernathy’s view, “performance emerges as the central metaphor of the text, for industry and commerce have destroyed all genuine forms of human engagement for Crews’s characters” (76). Naturally, “performance” lies at the heart of Garden Hills’s new tourism industry and its involvements with grotesquerie; for Abernathy, the book presents “characters for whom a performance of the grotesque is the only means to selfhood” (76). In other words, in Abernathy’s view, the “selfhood” that the book’s characters seek “has itself become a commodity in Crews’s vision, and Dolly recognizes that only the abnegation of the self will make it marketable” (76). Consequently, for Abernathy, the novel’s treatment of
unusual bodies chiefly serves to illuminate the alienation that lies at the center of the modern condition.

Carol Elizabeth Lamb offers similar readings of *Naked in Garden Hills* in her 1983 MA thesis, “A Comical Treatment of the Grotesque by Three Southern Writers: Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Harry Crews.” Lamb also foregrounds the economic changes at the heart of Crews’s novel; she highlights, for example, the fact that Garden Hills “has been deserted by a ‘god’ of industry” (85-86). Further, Lamb additionally emphasizes the operations of the unusual bodies that pervade the book. She underscores, for example, the “grotesque” aura imparted by Fat Man’s “enormous appetite” (89). Furthermore, Lamb also recognizes the roles that Garden Hills’s remarkable bodies play in the town’s socioeconomic regeneration. For example, Lamb foregrounds Dolly’s “plan to save the people of Garden Hills,” a “plan” that “involves putting the ‘freaks’ of Garden Hills on display” (93). For Lamb, the fruit of this “plan” is partly regenerative (93). Lamb underscores, for example, the fact that Wes’s relationship with his wife improves substantially after he is brought “back to work” by Dolly’s enterprise (92). However, for Lamb, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s emphasis on the grotesque ultimately leads to a critique of the modern condition. For example, Dolly’s “plan” to rejuvenate the town “is grotesque, for it suddenly calls to mind the fact that our modern world to some extent, seems to run on the exploitation of others” (93). This view is perhaps best epitomized by her reading of the novel’s closing sequence, which she sees as presenting something similar to “a satanical service” where the townspeople “crucify Fat Man” (94). For Lamb, this scene suggests “the fact that hell is not some far-away place, but a place right here on earth” (94-95). In this way, this scene caps what Lamb sees as the novel’s interest in “spiritual decay” (85). After the departure of O’Boylan, in whom the town’s citizens “put their faith,” Garden Hills is left with “a wasteland
which reflected the spiritual emptiness of its inhabitants” (Lamb 86). Accordingly, to Lamb, the town is marked by an “inferno-like atmosphere” that “is grotesque, for it projects horrifying visions of a hell-on-earth” (86). This reading harmonizes with Lamb’s broader view of Crews’s uses of the grotesque; for Lamb, “Harry Crews heightens the grotesque by exaggerating man’s frustration and hopelessness as he struggles to survive in a modern world devoid of meaningful institutions” (ix).

The grotesque body, however, is often an ambiguous and deceptively complex figure. While *Naked in Garden Hills* does certainly seem to use the atypical bodies that populate its pages to shed light on problems associated with capitalism, tourism, and modernity, those same bodies also appear to signify a vague but palpable regenerative force. Perhaps nowhere is the double-edged potency of the grotesque body made more compellingly clear than in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. Over the course of a sustained engagement with the work of François Rabelais, *Rabelais and His World* explores what Bakhtin calls “grotesque realism” (18). For Bakhtin, “grotesque realism” hinges partly on a “bodily principle” that “is deeply positive” (19). In particular, Bakhtin emphasizes how this “bodily principle” centers on “the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed” and how consequently “all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (19). In Bakhtin’s view, the resulting corporeal “exaggeration has a positive, assertive character” (19). At the same time, Bakhtin also stresses that grotesque realism features “degradation,” which he defines as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” and “a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body,” as its “essential principle” (19). However, for Bakhtin, degradation’s performances within grotesque realism feature a profoundly ambivalent character; in Bakhtin’s words, it “means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at
the same time” and “to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (21). Consequently, while grotesque realism might frequently involve images of destruction and decay, it also often incorporates gestures toward regeneration and renewal. Further, for Bakhtin, grotesque realism and the grotesque body are closely tied to the social phenomenon of the carnival; he refers, for example, to “the carnival spirit on which the grotesque is based” and describes “carnival-grotesque images” (49, 34). The phenomenon of the carnival, for Bakhtin, is broad in character and extends beyond particular feasts, events, and artistic works; to Bakhtin, “the basic carnival nucleus of” the “carnival folk culture” should not be seen as “a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art,” but rather “belongs to the borderline between art and life” (7). Further, for Bakhtin, the phenomenon of the carnival is intimately involved with the destruction and regeneration of systems of social order; in Bakhtin’s words, it “celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom” (410). One scholar even claims that it “is revolution itself” (Holquist xviii). Consequently, Bakhtin’s vision of grotesque realism associates the equivocal meanings of the grotesque body with social rejuvenation and transformation.

If a full understanding of the body’s performances in *Naked in Garden Hills* is to be reached, it must be approached at least in part through Bakhtin’s insights into the ambivalent significance behind the grotesque. To be sure, the novel’s emphasis on grotesquerie does not lend the book an especially uplifting atmosphere. The inhabitants of Garden Hills do not seem to be particularly pleased with their lives, and this condition meets with expression in their unusual bodies. This fact finds repeated attestation in the available critical literature on *Naked in Garden Hills*. In Jeff Abernathy’s words, for example, the book’s characters “savagely act out a
performance of their own meaninglessness” and see “the grotesque” as “the only means to selfhood” (76). Along similar lines, Carol Elizabeth Lamb’s readings of the novel’s unusual bodies flow out of her broader view of “the grotesque” in Crews’s work as a function of Crews’s “exaggerating the futility and hopelessness of man’s existence in a world devoid of meaning” (72). However, as Bakhtin observes, “the bodily element” of “grotesque realism” possesses a “deeply positive” character (19). Indeed, for Bakhtin, even though “the grotesque” often does involve “destruction,” it also heralds “the birth of something new and better” (62). Accordingly, while many of the unusual bodies that appear in Naked in Garden Hills do belong to seemingly unhappy people and do appear to signify a sort of modern malaise, those same bodies also signal the advent of the economic regeneration and prosperity that modernity can bring. With the collapse of O’Boylan’s mining operation, Garden Hills is left “a ruin” (Crews, “Interview with Harry Crews” 46). By bringing tourism to the town, Dolly reinvigorates the economy of Garden Hills. This socioeconomic transition meets with parallels in the many bidirectional gestures that the book’s grotesque bodies enact. By foregrounding impotence, death, physical ineffectiveness, the ill effects of gluttony, and human waste, Naked in Garden Hills’s unusual bodies mirror and underscore the death of the old social and economic order that ultimately stemmed from and Jack O’Boylan’s phosphate mining operation. At the same time, by emphasizing sex, human and animal genitals, physical potency, laughter, and abundance, those same bodies participate in and solidify the parousia that Dolly delivers. In this way, the grotesque and otherwise unusual bodies of Naked in Garden Hills help to mark and generate the socioeconomic restoration that the rise of tourism effects over the course of Crews’s novel.
CHAPTER 2

TOURISM, PHOSPHATES, AND THE FLORIDIAN ECONOMY

In many ways, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s economic narrative finds referents in the historical particularities that undergird the novel. The geographical background of the novel seems clear. As he reveals in an interview with Anne Foata, Crews found inspiration for *Naked in Garden Hills* while “driving from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa, which means that I had to cross the Florida peninsula from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico, and I drove through Polk County, which is the phosphate capital of the world, as they call it” (“Interview with Harry Crews” 45). Further, pieces of the novel confirm that Polk County does indeed serve as the book’s geographical backdrop; on its third page, for example, the reader is shown “the four-lane superhighway connecting Orlando and Tampa” (3). *Naked in Garden Hills*’s temporal setting, however, is less precisely clear. The book provides few obvious chronological signposts. However, in the book’s first chapter, the novel’s narrator does relate that O’Boylan’s mining operation only entered Garden Hills “after the failed market had cured itself” in the wake of “the land boom” (10). A substantial “boom” occurred in Florida in the 1920s (“Florida Land Bubble” 260). Given the fact that Fat Man’s father was still alive and able to claim that his land was “not for sale” near the time of the arrival of O’Boylan’s operation, this would presumably place the main action of the novel somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century (Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* 12). Such a timeframe seems broadly compatible with the novel’s sources in Harry Crews’s own personal experience with driving through Polk County and with the novel’s date of publication.
Of course, the twentieth century saw a number of sweeping changes in the economic landscape of Florida. The state’s service and tourism industries, for example, experienced meteoric rises. In his book *The Sunshine Economy: An Economic History of Florida Since the Civil War*, for instance, William B. Stronge states that the state’s “transportation, trade, and services” industries saw an “80 percent increase in earnings” in the 1950s that “was twice the rate of growth in U.S. consumption expenditures as a whole” (160). According to a 1958 survey, some tourists were drawn to particular “commercial attractions,” including “Cypress Gardens and Silver Springs” (Stronge 163). Consequently, the tourist haven that Dolly helps to build is not without precedent in Florida’s history. In 1960, those same “industries” of “transportation, trade, and services” made up “47 percent of earnings in the state, compared to 39 percent nationally” (Stronge 166). Later, in 1972, Florida’s economy received a significant boost from the opening of Disney World (Stronge 198). Similar trends continued later in the century. Between the years of 1977 and 1986, for example, “tourist arrivals” in the state of Florida saw “an average annual increase of approximately 7 to 8 percent,” according to a 1987 report from the Florida Department of Commerce’s Division of Economic Development (Florida, Department of Commerce, Division of Economic Development, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *The Florida Economy: An Analysis of the Economy and Its Industrial Structure* 15). Consequently, the rise of tourism in Garden Hills is not without referents in Florida’s history. Around the time that Dolly brought tourism to Garden Hills, the actual, historical state of Florida saw immense growth in tourism’s contributions to its economy and in the importance of particular tourist destinations. Indeed, Jeff Abernathy seems to be aware of the historical grounding of Dolly’s fictional endeavors when he observes in “Agrarian Nightmare: Harry Crews’s Dark Vision in *Naked in Garden Hills*” that, while “Crews portrays Jack O’Boylan as an
Andrew Carnegie who abandons the very community to which he gives hope, Dolly’s genius is more like that of P.T. Barnum, or, better, Walt Disney, who transformed a nearby Florida swamp into a tourist trap extraordinaire” (72-73).

O’Boylan’s phosphate mining operation also meets with referents in the economic history of Florida in general and Polk County in particular. The harvesting of phosphates in Florida dates back to the nineteenth century; as early as 1890, Florida was exporting over eleven thousand tons of phosphate in one year (Blakey 33). Further, by 1890, Polk County in particular could already boast of two phosphate plants (Blakey 48). However, O’Boylan’s withdrawal from Garden Hills seems to go against a statewide trend. Stronge, for example, notes that “Florida phosphate production more than tripled from 1960 to 1980” (215). Indeed, as noted in a report of Florida’s Department of Commerce, in 1985, “Florida remained the nation’s predominant producer of phosphate rock, and for the 91st consecutive year supplied more than any other state” (Florida, Department of Commerce, Division of Economic Development, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *The Florida Economy: An Analysis of the Economy and Its Industrial Structure* 12). According to the same report, despite some downturns, Floridian “phosphate companies produced 39 million metric tons of phosphate rock, representing almost 80 percent of the nation’s and 25 percent of the world’s supply of phosphate” that year (Florida, Department of Commerce, Division of Economic Development, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *The Florida Economy: An Analysis of the Economy and Its Industrial Structure* 12). Accordingly, while some phosphate plants in Florida might have met with setbacks around the time period in which *Naked in Garden Hills* is set, the closure of O’Boylan’s plant cannot be accurately said to represent a wide trend in the Florida phosphate industry in the twentieth century.
Consequently, while some dimensions of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s underlying economic narrative find parallels in the history of Florida, others do not. Florida certainly did derive economic energy from tourism near the time in which Dolly seems to have transformed Garden Hills into a large tourist trap. However, the phosphate industry certainly did not abandon the state of Florida in the middle of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the fictional socioeconomic regeneration that the novel’s engagements with grotesque realism help to frame can only be read as a representation of historical reality insofar as they signify the flowering of Florida’s tourism industry.
CHAPTER 3

THE DESTRUCTIVE AND REGENERATIVE PERFORMANCES OF THE GROTESQUE BODY IN NAKED IN GARDEN HILLS

_Naked in Garden Hills_ does not wait long to introduce its readers to its preoccupation with grotesquerie. On the book’s first page, Jester “lay in the legs of his high-yellow woman and dreamed of the Kentucky Derby” (1). Much of the book’s first two paragraphs works to solidify and extend this link between the imaginary horserace in Jester’s head and the sexual act in which he is actually engaged. The novel’s first sentence, for example, equivocally claims that “Jester was asleep in the saddle” (1). Later sentences relate that Jester’s horse is “snorting, breathing like a bellows,” that “Jester rode him high and light,” and that Jester “and the horse were one” (1). Later, apparently at the conclusion of both Jester’s dream and his sexual performance, the book’s narrator records that “the horse reared, and Lucy rolled him off her and went to the bathroom” (2). Naturally, this connection assigns a palpable sexual potency to Jester; by comparing a sexual act in which Jester is currently involved to the Kentucky Derby, _Naked in Garden Hills_ plainly intimates a high view of Jester’s sexual abilities. This presentation of Jester’s sexual powers plainly associates Jester with the grotesque body. As Bakhtin notes in _Rabelais and His World_, the “debasement” at the heart of grotesque realism is paradoxically but closely linked to “copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (Bakhtin 21). Consequently, by highlighting his prowess, the beginning pages of the novel tie Jester’s body to a key component of Bakhtin’s grotesque body.
Bakhtin also emphasizes the sense of openness and the animalistic associations that sometimes attend appearances of the grotesque body; in the first chapter of *Rabelais and His World*, for example, Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque body “is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (27). Jester’s body, being involved in sexual intercourse, is clearly intertwined with its surroundings. Further, the wording of several pieces of this passage openly blurs the lines that separate Jester from the horses in his dream. While the narrator’s claims that Jester “and the horse were one,” that he “rode him high and light,” and that he “was asleep in the saddle” all clearly liken Jester and Lucy’s sexual activity to the relationships that bind jockeys and horses in the Kentucky Derby, they also obliquely suggest that Jester is involved in some sort of quasi-sexual union with the horse in his dreams (1). Accordingly, this opening sequence also weakens the boundaries that would typically separate jockeys from their horses. Additionally, the book’s opening paragraph relates that Jester’s “nostrils flared” and that “the smell of money was in the air” (1). Bakhtin specifically believes that “the nose and mouth” perform central roles in grotesque realism (316). Further, since the novel’s narrator particularly notes that Jester’s horse is “snorting, breathing like a bellows,” this emphasis on Jester’s nose and sense of smell pokes even more holes in the lines between Jester and his dreamed riding partner (1).

These muddled differentiations take on a more pointed significance when considered together with the genital puns that litter *Naked in Garden Hills*’s first few paragraphs. The book’s narrator claims, for example, that Jester “had power between his legs that could win—win it all” (2). At least on its surface, this “power” seems to refer to “the terrific muscles of the horse” (2). However, given Jester’s position on top of Lucy, it could very well also refer to Jester’s genitalia. Consequently, this ambiguous line links Jester’s imaginary horse to his actual
penis. Needless to say, this association does not imply that Jester’s sexual organs lack size or potency. Bakhtin numbers “excessiveness” and “hyperbolism” among the “fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (303). Further, Bakhtin also emphasizes that the grotesque body “is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” and “swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (317). As a result, for Bakhtin, “the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus” (317). Bakhtin further stresses that these pieces of the body “are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization” and “play the leading role in the grotesque image” (317). Consequently, these connections between Jester and his horse both highlight Jester’s sexual energy and productive capacities and further establish his grounding in the stockpile of images at the epicenter of grotesque realism.

The carnivalesque and grotesque nature of Jester’s dream finds its most obvious confirmation in the crowd that witnesses his imagined participation in the Kentucky Derby. Bakhtin frequently foregrounds the importance of large collectives of people in the expressive modes of grotesque realism and in the social phenomenon of the carnival; for example, he asserts that “the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character” and that examples “of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic ‘economic man,’ but to the collective ancestral body of all the people” (19). The crowd surrounding Jester and his horse certainly possesses a strong presence within the narrative of Jester’s dream; the book’s narrator, for instance, states that a “crowd was there, spilling away from him, its baying white face turned up to him, pleading for the black stallion’s victory” and that “at the rail and in the stands waved their arms madly, their betting slips clutched tightly” (1).
Naturally, by situating Jester within view of an apparently hysterical crowd, Crews cements and substantially deepens the carnivalesque tone that surrounds Jester’s grotesque dream. In other words, by tying Jester’s interactions with his horse to a frenzied communal event, Crews solidifies the carnivalesque character of the novel’s opening pages and the grotesque nature of the bodies that populate them.

However, Bakhtin cautions against identifying events involving crowds with the social phenomenon of the carnival. He particularly emphasizes in *Rabelais and His World* that it “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). Jester’s dream does appear to draw clear divisions between Jester and his horse as participants and the members of the frenetic “crowd” as spectators (1). On the surface, this distinction might appear to limit or even negate the carnivalesque and grotesque qualities that Jester’s dream seems to exhibit. However, the gaps between Jester and his audience are not quite as wide as they may initially appear. The novel’s narrator notes that the spectators possess “betting slips” (1). Accordingly, these apparently passive onlookers hold an active interest in the race that Jester is preparing to run. Further, the speaker of these first two paragraphs also notes that they “begged him to save them, to make this race their race” and are “pleading for the black stallion’s victory” (1). These snippets all suggest a blending of spectators and actors and a broadly participatory and carnivalesque spirit. Consequently, while Jester’s dream might not always perfectly replicate the social dynamics that the carnivalesque typically involves, it does allow for some overlap between the grotesque intimations of sexual potency and generative abundance that follow Jester in these early pages and the crowd that cheers him on.

Eventually, Jester’s dream comes to an end; his dreamed “horse reared” as “Lucy rolled him off her and went to the bathroom,” presumably to relieve herself (2). This bathetic
juxtaposition of Jester’s sexual powers with Lucy’s need to heed nature’s call meets with clear resonances in Bakhtin’s conception of grotesque realism and the grotesque body. Bakhtin speaks at length in *Rabelais and His World* of the significance of excreta and its relationship with grotesque realism’s emphasis on degradation. In his book’s introduction, for example, Bakhtin ties “defecation” to “debasement” and the functions of “the lower stratum of the body” that lie at the heart of grotesque realism (21). He later asserts that “the slinging of excrement and drenching in urine are traditional debasing gestures, familiar not only to grotesque realism but to antiquity as well” (148). Although he later states that “such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum,” Bakhtin also claims that this sort of action clearly “signifies destruction” (148). While Lucy may not throw the waste that she presumably expels, the jarring collocation of her visit to the restroom with the glory of Jester’s dream certainly does appear to intimate some sort of degradation. Furthermore, the act of evacuation inherently involves the elimination of something unwanted and therefore suggests a sort of destruction. Consequently, this opening sequence closely associates Jester with both sides of grotesque realism’s ambivalent emphasis on what Bakhtin terms “the lower stratum of the body”; its foregrounding of Jester’s sexual prowess strongly points toward a “new birth,” while its termination in Lucy’s need to expel waste obliquely suggests an association with what Bakhtin calls “a bodily grave” (21).

It is also this opening series that first introduces *Naked in Garden Hills*’s readers to the novel’s fixation with humor. Both Jester’s conflation of Lucy with his imagined horse and the bathetic drop that slams the door on his dream inspire as much amusement as shock. Similar humorous episodes occur throughout the remainder of *Naked in Garden Hills*; in the book’s last
scene, for example, the reader again sees Jester “astride Lucy as she mimicked the motions of a running horse” (211). Laughter and humor play a central role in Bakhtin’s view of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque; in the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, for example, Bakhtin claims that the particular sort of common “laughter” that “characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum” and that it “degrades and materializes” (20). Accordingly, laughter both interlocks with the broader phenomenon of grotesque realism as a whole and participates in one of its most important gestures. Multiple critics have explored the roles that humor plays in *Naked in Garden Hills* and in Crews’s works as a whole. For example, as its title implies, Carol Elizabeth Lamb’s “A Comical Treatment of the Grotesque by Three Southern Writers: Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Harry Crews” foregrounds the machinations of the humorous in several of Crews’s books. Overall, within the context of Lamb’s project, humor is connected to characters whose “lifestyles are grotesque” and whose “existence” is marked by “absurdity” (115). Lamb’s view of the humor in Lucy and Jester’s sexual relationship proceeds from this perspective; she states, for example, that “Jester’s absurd actions are humorous” but also “horrifying, for he fails to perceive the difference between a woman, a chair and a horse” (88). Accordingly, for Lamb, the laughter that Jester and Lucy’s sexual interactions provoke primarily points toward the hollowness and meaninglessness of Jester and Lucy’s lives. However, as Bakhtin observes, the laughter that emerges from the operations of grotesque realism can also serve to regenerate and restore; like all degrading gestures, laughs can possess what Bakhtin calls a “positive regenerating power” (45). The laughter that *Naked in Garden Hills*’s opening section provokes is no exception. By inspiring humor, Jester and Lucy’s interactions in this scene intermix a sort of joviality with the intimations of corporeal excess and destruction that define the book’s opening
pages. In its presentations of sex and human waste, this introductory scene combines strong feelings of both reproduction and destruction. The humor that pervades the novel’s early pages helps to frame this startling combination within a broadly positive and jocular atmosphere. Accordingly, Crews’s implementation of humor in *Naked in Garden Hills*’s opening section helps to tip the passage’s scales toward regeneration. In this sense, this scene’s use of laughter helps to maintain its participation in grotesque realism’s upward swings. However, the importance of this passage’s uses of the grotesque does not quite become clear until later sections of the novel allow context to cohere around Jester and Lucy.

The full meaning and significance behind Jester’s associations with grotesque realism and the grotesque body lie in Jester’s relationships with the power structures of Garden Hills. Toward the beginning of the novel, Jester serves as a sort of personal assistant to the physically limited Fat Man; his duties include, for example, helping Fat Man undress out of “silk pajamas,” grooming Fat man while he lies in “a padded leather chair which had an electric motor in it that caused the chair to recline,” and driving the Buick into which Fat Man’s size forces him “to fall” (23, 26, 28). This role provides Jester with a special place in Garden Hill’s social hierarchy. Fat Man is no ordinary resident of Garden Hills. In the early days of Jack O’Boylan’s involvement with Garden Hills, before Fat Man’s birth, “Fat Man’s father” held “two acres” of land near O’Boylan’s project (12). At one point, O’Boylan’s “geologists” determine that “the ten square miles” that made up Garden Hills “were not any good without the two acres” (12). Later, by falsely claiming that his acres “were not for sale,” Fat Man’s father manages to become “raised from the ordinary condition of men” (12). Ironically, O’Boylan’s geologists eventually realize that they have made an “error” and do not actually need Fat Man’s father’s land (13). However, the damage was done; by the time that this mistake had come to Jack O’Boylan’s attention, he
had already “put fifty thousand dollars in a bank account in his name and promised another fifty thousand every year thereafter, for as long as the mine was in operation,” while his “agents” had already “built him a house larger than any he had ever seen” (13, 12, 12). Accordingly, by serving as Fat Man’s personal assistant, Jester holds a close relationship with the direct descendant of one of Garden Hills’s most prominent citizens.

Further, after the collapse of O’Boylan’s phosphate mining project, Fat Man himself becomes the ruler of Garden Hills. On “that first day the plant shut down,” O’Boylan’s man “had come in a huge shining Cadillac” (122). After being granted entry by Jester, this “fair, blue-eyed young man” summarily tells Fat Man that “Jack O’Boylan wants you to have it” (123). He presents Fat Man with “papers, deeds, titles, notarized and official with wax seals and emblems” that grant him possession of “a five million dollar outlay” (123). After “signing as fast as he could, all the copies, on all the lines,” Fat Man gained control of “it all,” including “all the land” and Jack O’Boylan’s “refining plant” (124). In the first pages of the novel, O’Boylan’s “plant” is already “abandoned” (3). Consequently, at the start of Harry Crews’s novel, Fat Man rules the town of Garden Hills. Indeed, the book’s opening chapter emphasizes Fat Man’s prominence; as a recently awakened Jester surveys the area surrounding Garden Hills, the novel’s narrator notes that “the house of Fat Man” stands “on a high plateau of earth” and at “the other end” of a “road that led through Garden Hills” from “the plant” (3).

Accordingly, Jester’s relationship with Fat Man places him in close proximity to the seat of power in the decayed town. In other words, as Fat Man’s servant, Jester maintains clear and close ties to the pinnacle of the socioeconomic ladder that emerges in the wake of the mining operation’s disintegration. Viewed from the perspective of this relationship, the sexual power that the novel’s first chapter assigns to Jester begins to take on a wider meaning. By serving as
Fat Man’s personal assistant, Jester carries the generative potency that his grotesque body signifies into the shadow of Garden Hills’s interregnal power structure. Consequently, the power that seems to surround Jester is able to intimately interweave itself with the rot and waste that defines the time of Fat Man’s rule. Accordingly, Jester’s presence in *Naked in Garden Hills* mixes a sense of regeneration and impending rebirth into the blight and corrosion that pervades the book’s earlier chapters. In this sense, Jester’s corporeality helps to imbue Garden Hills with an ambivalence similar to the “death-renewal-fertility” that Bakhtin observes in Rabelais’s work (327).

Furthermore, the lurking virility that Jester exudes diverges sharply from the physical presence that Fat Man provides. As his name suggests, Fat Man is profoundly obese. Indeed, the novel’s readers learn in the opening paragraph of the book’s second chapter that Fat Man’s body reaches “five hundred and seventy-eight pounds” (19). This extreme weight receives a great deal of emphasis. Later in the novel’s second chapter, for example, the reader is introduced to Fat Man’s “weight chart,” which has been “kept daily for years” and sits on a “carved mahogany door” in Fat Man’s bathroom (26). Although the chart features “two columns: one for gains and one for losses,” the latter section contains “no entries” (26). The book’s narrator goes on to describe the chart as “a history of one continuous progression upward, a ballooning, a swelling beyond all reason” and “a biography” (26). Here, Fat Man’s obesity is almost allowed to completely take over his identity. If the history of Fat Man’s weight is his “biography,” the narrative of his life must at least largely operate as a function of his obesity (26). Bakhtin highlights both “excessiveness” and “the belly” as important components of grotesque realism (303, 21). Consequently, the stress that *Naked in Garden Hills* places on Fat Man’s extreme weight clearly associates Fat Man’s body with grotesquerie.
Predictably, Fat Man’s immense size coexists with a considerable capacity for hunger. Perhaps nowhere is the scope of Fat Man’s appetite clearer than in the opening passages of the novel’s second chapter. Here, Fat Man lies awake, “pretending he was asleep, pretending he had not been up the entire night in a drunken stupor” (19). Over the course of the previous night, Fat Man consumed what he estimates to be “forty-eight cans” of the weight loss product “Metrecal” (20). Evidence of the rampage fills the scene; for example, “aluminum cans sat everywhere: six or eight on the dresser, several in the bed with him, and more than he could count scattered over the floor” (19). The following paragraph further notes that “sounds of the sea: waves lapping, sloshings, gurglings” run through Fat Man’s body (20). These details help to establish the enormity of Fat Man’s binge. Later pieces of the novel reveal a similar concern with Fat Man’s rapacious appetite. The novel’s seventh chapter, for example, reveals that Fat Man “had never had any other desire than to put everything outside himself inside himself, to put the world in his stomach” (115). For Bakhtin, Rabelais’s emphasis on “images of the human body” that relate to “food” and to “drink,” among other corporeal engagements, stem from and relate to “grotesque realism” (18). Further, Bakhtin also claims that “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth” (317). Needless to say, Fat Man’s remarkable appetite places his mouth at the forefront of his characterization. In this way, Fat Man’s love of eating helps to establish his body’s grounding in the constellation of images on which grotesque realism rests.

Naturally, this combination of obesity and appetite does not produce a particularly able body. Fat Man’s size complicates and restricts many of his everyday activities. In order to exit a bathtub, for example, Fat Man must expend a good deal of effort and enlist Jester’s assistance; in the novel’s seventh chapter, he “rolled onto his stomach, pushed to his hands and knees, rose out of the water to a kneeling position, and then with the aid of Jester, got to his feet” (116). Further,
he is obligated to wear “custom slippers made from unborn calves’ hide” that are “terribly expensive,” as “they were the only shoes he could bear on his feet because his soft pink toes were as tender as a virgin’s nipples” (27). Needless to say, these points do not present Fat Man as a particularly healthy person. Indeed, throughout the novel, Fat Man’s enormous body encounters numerous limitations and seems almost moribund. Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body relies heavily on images of death and decay; the “degradation” at the heart of grotesque realism does involve “a destructive, negative aspect” (21). Consequently, the extreme nature of Fat Man’s obesity draws close ties between Fat Man and a key component of grotesque realism.

Of course, Bakhtin’s grotesque body is not limited to its “negative aspect” (21). For Bakhtin, the “degradation” at the epicenter of grotesque realism creates a space for replacement and restoration (21). Accordingly, grotesque realism’s grounding in “the lower stratum of the body” ties it to “the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (21). However, Fat Man’s grotesque body does not seem to find any footing in the reproductive capacities of the lower stratum. Throughout the novel, Fat Man persistently appears to be sexually ineffective. His one significant encounter with love and sex ends in failure. While at “Florida Northern,” Fat Man meets a male “cross-country champion” whose “name was Obediah Martin, nicknamed Freckles and called Frecks” (111). The two “became fast friends” (113). Eventually, Fat Man and Frecks begin to enter into a sort of romantic affair. They “wrestled every evening in the dorm” and “managed to move into the same room” (114). One evening, Fat Man offers “to try to teach” Frecks how to read (115). Frecks rejects Fat Man’s offer, and Fat Man subsequently “did the only thing he could do: he kissed the cross-country champion on the mouth because he loved him” (116). Frecks, who does not want Fat Man “to know me as a person,” is apparently angered by this exchange (117). He later warns that “if you on this campus tomorrow night, you a dead
man” (117). Clearly, this brief union is wholly unproductive. Fat Man’s attraction to Frecks never quite flowers into a full relationship; whatever bond the two young men shared is suddenly and violently cut short not long after it begins to emerge. Within the pages of the novel, Fat Man never seems to attempt to replace this lost relationship. Consequently, he remains linked with sexual failure throughout the book.

Further, *Naked in Garden Hills* seems to associate Fat Man’s homosexuality with a sort of sexual inefficacy. Perhaps most obviously, his one attempt at obtaining the love of another man ends in a disaster. Further, Dolly’s attempts to have sex with Fat Man end in obvious failures. Before leaving Garden Hills for New York City, Dolly offers to “shuck right down to the skin” (67). She then goes on to note that she has preserved her “maidenhead” and hopes to give it to Fat Man (68). Fat Man, apparently shocked, eventually “screamed” for Jester (69). After objecting to Fat Man’s reaction, Dolly summarily “turned on her heel and walked out of the house and down the steep scarred hill and finally to the highway where she flagged down the Greyhound bus” (69). Here, at least presumably in part because of his homosexuality, Fat Man fails to engage in a potentially generative sexual act. A similar scene appears in the novel’s tenth chapter. After returning from “looking for Jack O’Boylan” in New York City, Dolly again attempts to initiate sexual intercourse with Fat Man (159). Eventually realizing the futility of his attempts at resistance, Fat Man “let her have” his clothing and subsequently allows his “white, wrinkled and dimpled” body to emerge in its full nakedness (161). Dolly then again offers her “maidenhead” to Fat Man (163). Predictably, Fat Man refuses, claiming that he does not “want it” (163). This refusal seems to stem at least partly from Fat Man’s homosexuality. When Dolly undresses, she appears “wrong” to Fat Man (162). Her naked body “did not fit his dreams” and “swelled and receded in the wrong places” (162). Whatever the reason, Dolly certainly does not
manage to consummate the act that she attempts to initiate. Fat Man eventually claims that he “can’t” have sex with Dolly and explains that he “never had a hard-on” (164). Dolly asserts that she is aware of “things to do that’d give a corpse a hard-on” (164). Fat Man protests that his size prevents him from being able to “lie flat,” but Dolly counters that there are “a hundred different ways to do it and I know them all” (164). However, Dolly’s efforts only amount to a “failure” (180). Needless to say, this scene unequivocally paints Fat Man as wholly sexually ineffective. He is impotent, and his extreme obesity limits his ability to even attempt certain forms of sexual contact.

Overall, Fat Man’s association with sexual futility finds clear parallels in his reign in Garden Hills. Fat Man only begins his ownership of Garden Hills on “that first day the plant shut down” (122). Consequently, from its beginning, Fat Man’s rule is characterized by poverty, hopelessness, and economic sterility. In this sense, Fat Man’s grotesque body mirrors the state of the social order that he dominates. Just as Garden Hills does not produce phosphate, economic prosperity, or hope during Fat Man’s dynasty, Fat Man’s body fails to enter into productive sexual activity. Further, just as Garden Hills is marked by decay, malaise, and degeneration under Fat Man’s regime, Fat Man’s body is thoroughly and obviously unhealthy and physically limited. In a sense, Fat Man’s body serves as a sign of the socioeconomic situation that defines Garden Hills after the departure of O’Boylan’s mining enterprise and before the ascendance of Dolly’s tourism operations. Consequently, Fat Man seems to embody the “negative aspect” of grotesque realism and the social phenomenon of the carnivalesque with which it is associated (Bakhtin 21). However, his failure to engage in productive sexual activity cuts him off from the regenerative gestures that grotesque realism typically involves. In this sense, Fat Man’s grotesque body restricts itself to one aspect of grotesque realism. Furthermore, as the leader of a
decaying Garden Hills, Fat Man also embodies a chief angle of the associated social phenomenon of the carnival. In Bakhtin’s view, this communal phenomenon “celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom” and that this “old world that has been destroyed is offered together with the new world and is represented with it as the dying part of the dual body” (410). Accordingly, as the most prominent figure in an economically dying world and the occupant of an unhealthy and impotent body, Fat Man epitomizes the negative dimensions of both grotesque realism and the carnival.

Further, the passages that illustrate Fat Man’s sexual ineffectiveness and corporeal hyperbolism are often among the funniest scenes in *Naked in Garden Hills*. While Fat Man’s failures may sometimes inspire pity, the tone of Crews’s writing allows those same failures to simultaneously inspire laughter. For example, while Fat Man’s limited mobility might provoke sympathy in some readers, the narrator’s claim that “his soft pink toes were as tender as a virgin’s nipples” is clearly designed to generate laughs (27). A similar humor pervades the scenes that present Fat Man’s inability to engage in sexual activity with Dolly. Carol Elizabeth Lamb reads the humor of these instances as chiefly bleak and dark; in Lamb’s words, even though her “attempts to seduce Fat Man on the kitchen table, in a chair, and in the library, provide a temporary outlet for our anxieties, as our laughter ceases, the futility of Dolly’s quest to find true love and someone to believe, becomes grotesquely magnified” (92). To be sure, Dolly does seem unhappy in these scenes; her quick exit at the end of the book’s fourth chapter, for example, clearly reveals a deep disappointment. As such, she and Fat Man’s failures can provoke pity. However, at the same time, the laughter that these scenes produce clearly possesses what Bakhtin describes as a “positive regenerating power” (45). In being invited to laugh at Fat Man’s grotesque body and its lack of sexual potency, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s readers are invited
to mock and consequently delegitimize the leading figure of Garden Hills’s old and comparably ineffective social order. Accordingly, Crews’s use of humor in these scenes allows the book’s readers to participate in the town’s regeneration. In other words, by laughing at Fat Man’s powerless and deteriorating body, the novel’s audience rejects the value of the decayed system that Fat Man both leads and symbolizes and thereby helps to clear the way for the new system that eventually supplants it. Consequently, the laughter that surrounds this passage clearly plays a part in the restorative arc that runs throughout the novel’s overarching engagements with the grotesque. In this sense, Fat Man’s body does not only signify what Frank W. Shelton sees as a reflection of Fat Man’s “entrapment” in the decayed world of post-O’Boylan Garden Hills (103). Rather, the extreme nature of Fat Man’s corporeal aberrations also allows the book’s audience to participate in the destruction of the social system that Fat Man leads and the rejuvenation that Dolly eventually delivers.

However, if Fat Man’s debilitated and ailing body does act as a sign of Garden Hills’s stunted economy, Jester’s virility may herald the regeneration that Dolly eventually brings. The emphasis that the novel places on Jester’s genitals and his sexual relationship with Lucy contrasts in obvious ways with Fat Man’s sexual inefficacy. Further, Fat Man’s bloated and obese body diverges sharply from Jester’s, which weighs “ninety pounds” and which Lucy finds to be “the most perfect thing she had ever seen” (25, 5). As a result, by injecting the novel with a grotesque but at least comparatively healthy and potent physical presence, Jester points toward Garden Hills’s restoration. In this sense, Jester helps to counterbalance the death and decay that Fat Man’s grotesquely obese body epitomizes and thereby begins to hint at a renewal similar to the “new birth” that grotesque realism inevitably involves (Bakhtin 21). Consequently, in a way, Jester suggests the impending collapse of Fat Man’s rule. If Fat Man’s obesity and fruitlessness
mirror and signify the decayed social system over which Fat Man reigns, Jester’s body obliquely proclaims the new socioeconomic order that threatens to replace Fat Man’s dynasty from within Garden Hills.

A few pieces of *Naked in Garden Hills* indirectly extend Jester’s association with the end of Fat Man’s rule and Garden Hills’s subsequent rejuvenation. In the book’s second chapter, for example, Jester helps Fat Man to weigh himself in a bathroom, the “ceiling” of which is “covered with a tile copy of Michelangelo’s *Creation*” (23). Naturally, this scene foregrounds Fat Man’s obesity. The novel’s narrator relates that “Jester helped Fat Man out of his silk pajamas” and that this act “took a while” (23). Subsequently, Fat Man’s “body flowed downward from the head in ever larger, swelling rings of fat” (23-24). In this way, this episode highlights Fat Man’s ties to the lower stratum of the body and to physical decay. Further, the appearance of Michelangelo’s *Creation* also participates in the grotesque. Bakhtin defines “degradation” as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19, 19-20). By placing a great work of art on the tiles of a bathroom ceiling, *Naked in Garden Hills* unambiguously engages in an act of degradation. However, the appearance of *Creation* also intimates a sense of regeneration and bodily renewal. Obviously, the subject of Michelangelo’s *Creation* immediately carries hints of new beginnings into this passage. Further, the novel’s narrator includes a description of the tiles that highlights the corporeal themes of Michelangelo’s painting; in a paragraph detailing the bathroom, the reader is told that “Adam languished, his huge muscles inert, between two recessed fluorescent lamps” and that “God, his beard whipping in the wind, strained to touch him” (23). Consequently, this section’s treatment of Michelangelo’s *Creation* serves to insert suggestions of bodily regeneration and of debasement into the novel’s second chapter. Although
Jester may not possess any direct ties to Fat Man’s ceiling art, his presence and active participation in this scene links his physical virility to both Fat Man’s degradation and to a sense of impending restoration.

However, full regeneration only comes to Garden Hills through Dolly. Under her direction, Garden Hills becomes an enormous and successful tourist attraction. A “telescope” is placed in “Reclamation Park,” a small “roadside park” that was somehow “mass-produced” (35). The telescope allows tourists to view a series of attractions in the area, including “The Emerald,” a lake with “a scum on it that was thick enough to walk on” (37). Throughout *Naked in Garden Hills*, the entire town seems to become the object of the telescope’s scrutiny. After awaking from his Metrecal-induced stupor in the novel’s second chapter, for instance, Fat Man looks out at the park “and was startled to find the telescope looking at him” (20). Over time, the telescope manages to generate quite a bit of revenue; early in the novel, Dolly claims that the town “got fifteen dollars out of the telescope yesterday” and expects to “get thirty today and tomorrow sixty” (29). At the epicenter of Dolly’s tourism operation lies a dance venue, or “go-go,” with “a cage for the Queen” (33). The new attraction sits in O’Boylan’s old phosphate plant, which has been illuminated by “brilliant floodlights” and renamed “DOLLY DOO AND HER DIMPLE REVIEW” (133). Naturally, this new enterprise goes a long way toward revitalizing Garden Hills’s economy. For example, Dolly employs many of the town’s citizens. Wes, for instance, is hired to stand in a “hole,” churn earth, wear a “mask” that “would crack into a thousand pieces” if he attempted to talk, and thereby serve as a living attraction for tourists to ogle and photograph (130). He receives “ninety-seven dollars every Friday” for his services (76). Despite the bizarre nature of his duties, Wes’s life certainly improves as a result of his newfound employment; in the
book’s eighth chapter, for example, Wes’s “heart sang with a happiness that he had not known in years” (133). In this way, Dolly helps to return Garden Hills to a level of prosperity.

However, Dolly’s new enterprise does not benefit every citizen of Garden Hills evenly. In particular, Fat Man frequently seems to stand as a victim of the change and progress that Dolly brings; while tourism might offer new opportunities to many of Garden Hills’s inhabitants, Fat Man generally reaps ridicule and disempowerment from Dolly’s endeavors. A particularly clear example of Fat Man’s propensity to be preyed on by Dolly’s entrepreneurial exploits emerges in his relationships with the town’s new telescopes. While these instruments might serve as a tool of the town’s new economic system, Fat Man serves as their fodder and their victim. When he finds himself “eyeball to eyeball” with a tourist using a telescope in the book’s second chapter, for instance, Fat Man is clearly not pleased; he feels “humiliated” and “cursed softly” (21). Consequently, the telescopes help to perpetuate Fat Man’s denigration and delegitimization. At the same time that they help Fat Man to fuel Garden Hills’s newly revitalized economy by providing tourists with a sight that occupies their attention, Dolly’s telescopes also permit those same tourists to view Fat Man’s grotesque body and to fill Fat Man with shame and anger. In this way, the telescopes of Garden Hills allow the town’s tourists to disparage both Fat Man and the decaying social order that he epitomizes in a manner similar to the laughter that the book’s presentations of Fat Man frequently provoke.

Of course, Garden Hills’s telescopes can evoke a variety of meanings. In some senses, for example, the telescopes’ operations recall insights that Guy Debord offers in Society of the Spectacle. At the outset of his project, for instance, Debord claims that existence within “those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (12). Significantly, the sort of “spectacle” in which Debord is
interested must not be seen as “a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (12). In many ways, the presence of the telescopes of Garden Hills helps to frame the entire town as a sort of spectacular sight. Some critics have pointed toward the novel’s interest in spectacles. Abernathy, for example, seems to echo Debord in his belief that “performance emerges as the central metaphor of the text, for industry and commerce have destroyed all genuine forms of human engagement for Crews’s characters” (76). By foregrounding a “performance” that emerges from the destructive powers of a new economic system, Abernathy seems to suggest that Naked in Garden Hills centers in part on a Debordian spectacle (76). Abernathy further suggests the important role played by telescopes in the town’s new socioeconomic order when he notes that, after Dolly “erects a telescope in the small park overlooking the town—Reclamation Park, mass-produced in Peoria, Illinois and trucked in—curiosity seekers begin to stop and look” (72). In these ways, while he does not specifically invoke Debord, Abernathy gestures toward ways in which Naked in Garden Hills harmonizes with many of Debord’s claims about the social dynamics that emerge from modern economic systems and the important part that telescopes play in those harmonies. When seen from these perspectives, the performances of Garden Hills’s telescopes help to extend the novel’s overarching interest in socioeconomic change and progress.

The machinations of Garden Hills’s telescopes also serve as the clearest and most concrete example of the novel’s fixation with the act of looking. Throughout its duration, Naked in Garden Hills repeatedly foregrounds sight. Perhaps most obviously, the tourists that flock to Garden Hills imbue the book with a persistent and palpable sense of the voyeuristic; at the opening of the book’s eighth chapter, for example, the reader is presented with a tourist who “was fondling a camera strung from a leather strap about his neck” and whose “eyes were large
and black and wet and very loose in his head” and who “looked as though he were trying to
decide whether or not to waste a picture on something that was just a man” (129). Along similar
lines, the novel’s emphasis on go-go dancing, perhaps best epitomized in the performance at
“DOLLY’S A GO-GO” in the novel’s closing sequence, unequivocally highlights the importance
of seeing as a way of ordering relationships between characters (210). At the same time, the
novel’s readers are also invited to obliquely see and stare at the many unusual bodies that
populate the book’s pages. When considered from some of the perspectives recently offered in
the field of disability studies, this fixation with seeing and staring might help to throw new light
on Naked in Garden Hills’s use of unusual bodies.

Some readers may not immediately view the characters of Naked in Garden Hills as
disabled. However, some of the atypical bodies that fill Naked in Garden Hills’s pages do seem
to fall within the bounds of some definitions of disability; Fat Man, for example, appears to stand
as an especially qualified candidate. The Americans with Disabilities Act lays out “three distinct
facets of disability: (1) the impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record
that identifies a history of an individual’s impairment; and (3) a trait or characteristic that results
in the stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated” (Mitchell and Snyder 2). Fat
Man’s body certainly does seem to inhibit his day-to-day activities, as witnessed by the fact that
Jester must spend a fair amount of time helping Fat Man undress out of his “silk pajamas” (23).
Additionally, while the novel’s readers may not ever see Fat Man’s medical records, other
citizens of Garden Hills do seem to assign a degree of stigma to him; Jester, for example,
ultimately rejects him at least in part because his obesity “gone swallow you up, drown you”
(158). Consequently, Fat Man does fall within at least two definitions of disability given by the
Americans with Disabilities Act. Further, in their introduction to The Body and Physical
Difference: Discourses of Disability, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder underline the importance of a disability’s “resistance to cure or successful rehabilitation” as a defining characteristic (3-4). Fat Man’s obesity does seem to be rooted in permanence; his experiences with Metrecal in the novel’s second chapter, for instance, certainly point toward a history of failed treatments. As such, Fat Man might be productively read as a disabled character. From this perspective, Naked in Garden Hills’s preoccupation with sight and staring takes on a host of new meanings.

In Staring: How We Look, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson offers extended engagements with the act of staring and its relationship to remarkable and atypical bodies and body parts; in particular, Garland-Thomson notes that the act of staring can operate as “a social act that stigmatizes by designating people whose bodies or behaviors cannot be readily absorbed into the visual status quo” (44). For Garland-Thomson, this dynamic holds true for individuals whose bodies exceed typical proportions; for example, when discussing “the example of Robert Wadlow, the tallest man in recorded history,” Garland-Thomson notes that Wadlow’s “medical condition made Wadlow grow large, but staring made him into a Giant” (168). As such, for Garland-Thomson, the act of staring can serve to categorize, denigrate, and push away individuals who possess atypical bodies. Fat Man’s experiences with staring appear to operate along similar lines. Throughout Naked in Garden Hills, Fat Man seems to be perpetually on the receiving end of stares. The novel’s readers indirectly stare at Fat Man through the many detailed descriptions of his obesity that the book provides. Further, Garden Hills’s telescopes allow Fat Man to be stared at by other characters from afar, such as when he finds himself “caught in the lens of a tourist” in the novel’s second chapter (21). In this early episode, Fat Man initially attempts to counterbalance the “humiliated” state that the tourist’s staring inspires; after
recognizing the situation in which the tourist has placed him, Fat Man “doggedly held his
ground, returning look for look, staring back through the binoculars” (21). Garland-Thomson
speaks of the trouble that “starees” face when trying to determine “how to look back” (84). She
particularly foregrounds ways in which a recipient of stares can “take charge of a staring
situation” (84). “Refusing to wilt under another’s stare,” she particularly claims, “is a way to
insist on one’s dignity and worth” (86). However, Fat Man fails in his attempt to assert himself;
after encountering Fat Man’s counterblow, the tourist “grabbed a small child—a boy it was with
a round head and red hair—and thrust him up to the telescope” (21). This proves to be too much
for Fat Man, who “retreated from the window back into the shadows of the room, stepping on a
can as he did, smashing it flat, almost losing his balance” (21). The child’s age apparently pushes
Fat Man over the edge; the passage’s narrator notes that younger onlookers “were beyond
enduring,” as they “pointed” and “shouted,” unlike their older counterparts, which simply
“talked under their breath” and “looked out of the corner of their eye” (21). Indeed, Garland-
Thomson notes that younger onlookers “not yet fully socialized can stare with an innocent
curiosity that starees often indulge, but which sometimes swells into taunting or aggression”
(88). As such, Fat Man’s trouble in dealing with the child’s stares are not unique to his
experience. Whatever the reason, Fat Man eventually finds himself unable to match the potency
of the tourists’ stares, and his encounter with the telescope ends in embarrassment, panic, and
shame. Other instances in which Fat Man stands on the receiving end of stares also appear in
Naked in Garden Hills. Perhaps most importantly, for example, Fat Man’s performance in “the
cage” allows him to be stared at in a particularly obvious, organized, and deliberate way (211).
Overall, each of these instances of staring serves to degrade Fat Man and further tie his identity
to his grotesque obesity. Presumably, neither the novel’s readers nor the town’s tourists feel a
compulsion to stare at Fat Man for any reason other than his extreme size and its corporeal consequences. Accordingly, these acts of staring help to further stigmatize Fat Man as a corporeal aberration. In this sense, the novel’s use of staring helps to further effect the rejection of both Fat Man’s unhealthy body and the decaying social order that it represents. As Gary L. Long notes in “Naked Americans: Violence in the Work of Harry Crews,” the “tourist mob” that is attracted to the town “is witness and accomplice to Dolly’s triumph, to Fat Man’s humiliation as an attraction in a sideshow of freaks” (122). In this way, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s approaches to disability and to the act of staring interlock with its participations in Bakhtinian grotesque realism. By using the act of staring and Fat Man’s disabled body to denigrate Fat Man, *Naked in Garden Hills* extends the ties that link the old social order that Fat Man leads and signifies to bodily degeneration and degradation. Consequently, the novel’s treatment of Fat Man’s disabled body parallels and reinforces the socioeconomic narrative that the book’s broader interactions with grotesque realism help to trace.

However, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s approaches to unusual bodies are not limited to the foregrounding of Fat Man’s corporeal excesses and the socioeconomic decay and rejection that they symbolize. In keeping with the principles of grotesque realism, Dolly and her new tourist attractions are also closely linked to the productive capacities of the body’s lower stratum. Obviously, go-go dancing emphasizes the sexual dimensions of the human body. In this sense, Dolly’s enterprise hinges on spectacles that stem from the body’s generative abilities. Further, Dolly herself is chiefly defined by her sexuality. Many of Dolly’s appearances in *Naked in Garden Hills* either hinge on or emphasize her reproductive anatomy. Near the middle of the novel, for example, Dolly accepts work as a go-go dancer at an establishment named “The Gilded Cage” (100). The job seems to lead Dolly to some sort of personal fulfillment; as she is
lifted above the crowd for the first time, the novel’s narrator states that Dolly “had arrived” (100). Clearly, by presenting Dolly’s maturation as a function of the act of go-go dancing, this episode closely and overtly ties Dolly’s identity to her sexuality. Earlier portions of the novel also draw connections from Dolly’s identity and ability to make money to her sexual interactions with others. In the book’s fourth chapter, for example, Naked in Garden Hills’s narrator describes how men “gave her things: licorice and lemon drops as a child, and later, as she was growing up, money” and “would press a hot half-dollar into her damp palm and then while she stood very still, would touch her secretively in secret places” (62). The same paragraph also discusses Dolly’s remarkable appeal; it asserts, for example, that Dolly “was the thing in men’s souls that is never sated, the beast in every man’s jungle” (62). Naturally, such claims intimate close links between Dolly’s sexual abilities and her personhood. Indeed, the emphasis that these passages place on Dolly’s sexuality pushes her toward the excess that lies at the heart of the bodily grotesque. Consequently, Dolly’s regeneration of Garden Hills arrives through a highly sexualized enterprise and under the leadership of an excessively and grotesquely sexualized individual. In this sense, Dolly and the tourist trap that she builds offset the physical degradation that Fat Man signifies as well as the economic stagnation associated with his rule. In this way, Dolly and Fat Man’s bodies serve as opposing poles of the same grotesque gesture, while the social orders that they lead stand on opposing ends of the same economic change. Just as Dolly relieves Garden Hills from the socioeconomic deterioration that defines Fat Man’s reign, she also counterbalances the sterility and decay that characterizes his impotent and grotesquely obese body and thereby completes the grotesque cycle that he begins. Accordingly, by meeting the decay that Fat Man’s participation in the life of the lower stratum embodies with a grotesquely excessive sexual power, Dolly fulfills the grotesque narrative that Fat Man’s body initiates. In
this sense, Fat Man and Dolly’s grotesque bodies parallel and consequently illuminate and underscore the socioeconomic death and regeneration that undergirds *Naked in Garden Hills*’s plot.

However, Dolly’s sexual potency does not initially enter *Naked in Garden Hills* as a fully realized force. Rather, throughout much of the novel’s duration, Dolly’s sexuality limits itself to an imminent and urgent but unrealized potentiality. Perhaps most obviously, several sections of the work foreground her virginity and the unrealized sexual capacity that it represents. In the book’s sixth chapter, for example, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s narrator states that Dolly’s “mouth was most on her mind, her toothless unfed mouth with no appetite, but a monumental need,” that “in her own mind, the maidenhead was strengthening,” and that Dolly “must use what she had before it was too late” (94). This graphic imagery serves to both foreground the unrealized nature of Dolly’s sexual and reproductive capabilities and tie her dormant sexual energy to the excess and the emphasis on the lower stratum that lie at the center of grotesque realism. In this way, *Naked in Garden Hills* allows the intimations of bodily regeneration that Dolly brings to the novel to remain in a sort of suspension during much of the book’s narrative.

As Dolly’s socioeconomic regeneration of Garden Hills progresses, she begins to expand her control over Garden Hills’s populace, reaching almost total control over the town on the date of her tourist enterprise’s “grand opening” (156). That day, for example, Dolly reveals that Jester “works for me now” (157). Fat Man offers to increase Jester’s pay, but Jester refuses to accept and goes on to state that he wants to obtain “the secret” (158). Earlier in the same chapter, the novel’s narrator reveals that “Jester wanted to know the secret of wealth, the secret of being on the hill in a house that was a fortress” (157). Consequently, “the secret” that Jester seeks is presumably money and power (158). Accordingly, his choice to migrate his allegiances to
Dolly’s camp seems to derive motivation at least in part from the economic restoration that Dolly brings. Importantly, however, Jester’s decision also pivots around Fat Man’s grotesque obesity. After refusing Fat Man’s offer, Jester says that he does not “want you to give me nothing because you gone die” and that Fat Man’s surplus weight “gone swallow you up, drown you” (158). Here, Jester makes it clear that the grotesque excesses of Fat Man’s body both will lead to Fat Man’s death and have already made him irrelevant to the future of Garden Hills. Just as Fat Man’s rule is clearly near its end, his body also appears to stand near death’s door. As a result, Jester’s change in loyalties helps to solidify links between Fat Man’s participations in the images of grotesque realism and the declining social order that he represents and leads. Further, by aligning himself with Dolly, Jester also unites the grotesque sexual potency with which the novel’s first chapter provides him to Dolly’s unfulfilled but heavily stressed sexual potentially. Consequently, at this point, both Dolly and Jester’s regenerative associations stand in clear opposition to Fat Man and the corporeal and economic decay that defines his presence in the novel. In other words, after this scene’s transfer of power, the two clearest beacons of bodily regeneration in Garden Hills openly associate themselves with the town’s new tourism industry and unequivocally reject the old and dying socioeconomic order that Fat Man controls and embodies.

However, at this point in the book, the unfulfilled nature of Dolly’s sexual potentiality still looms large. While Dolly may have won over Jester, she still has not conquered Fat Man. Indeed, the novel’s penultimate chapter emphasizes Dolly’s unrealized generative capacity by including another description of Dolly unsuccessfully attempting to “pick” her sexual target’s “cherry” (192). The book’s closing chapter, however, witnesses Dolly finally succeeding in her attempts to win over Fat Man, albeit in a different way.
Near the beginning of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s closing sequence, Dolly invites Fat Man to participate in the operations of her new tourist trap, relaying that she and her employees “saved a place for you” (197). At first, Fat Man claims that he will “never” take Dolly up on her offer (197). However, as time goes on, Fat Man’s situation becomes more desperate. Dolly limits Fat Man to “a thousand calories a day until you slim down” (202). One evening, as Fat Man’s “stomach was making hideous noises,” he begins to hear music coming from Dolly’s entertainment venue (206). These sounds later combine with “the smell of roasting flesh and fresh bread” (207). Naturally, the scents attract Fat Man to their source, and he eventually finds himself swimming in a carnivalesque frenzy of activity; “music raging,” “drinks,” “the red door with the gold star,” and a large “crowd” that features “women in long gowns and mini-skirts, wearing hats and bareheaded, bejeweled and sparkling in the sweeping floodlights, and men in satin tuxedos, in flowered, short-sleeved shirts, in black trousers and Bermuda shorts” all appear (209). However, Fat Man does not simply fade into the frenetic energy of the scene, but rather becomes the object of its attention. Fat Man’s clothing is “pulled” and “ripped,” causing his grotesque body to become naked (209). The crowd is jubilant; “laughter and cries of joy” meet the naked Fat Man (210). Oddly, this joviality intermixes with violence. The crowd’s members “were all clamoring to touch his belly, but there were so many of them that they had to push and shove, and finally the touches were jabs, then the jabs punches” (210). However, Fat Man’s degradation only reaches its apogee when he moves “to the huge red door and into DOLLY’S AGO-GO” (210). Inside, Fat Man sees Dolly, Jester sitting “spurred astride Lucy as she mimicked the motions of a running horse,” and “all the young women of Garden Hills wearing flesh-colored body stockings and locked in synchronized vibrations” (211). Amidst this grotesquely sexualized scene, Fat Man is led to a “cage” that contains “a standing rib roast, steaming yellow
corn awash in puddles of butter, loaves of bread, and a pitcher of Metrecal” (211). Fat Man’s audience then “burst into applause and cheers and sang ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’” (212). Finally, Fat Man “fell upon the meat,” and, in the book’s final sentence, his “cage started a gentle ascent as Wes and the other eleven men of Garden Hills heaved on the rope” (212).

The meanings behind this closing scene are clear. Fat Man finally submits to the new order that Dolly and tourism have created and allows his grotesque body to be degraded for the entertainment of the crowd in an unmistakably carnivalesque and thoroughly corporeal spectacle. Compelled by the immense needs of his hyperbolic body, Fat Man permits himself to be ridiculed by performing an excessive version of the very act that initially caused his body to reach the grotesque size that it possesses. No longer in control of Garden Hills, Fat Man descends into a crowd of tourists and serves as a sort of sacrifice to the town’s new economy by allowing the fullness of his grotesque body to be exposed to mockery and exploited for entertainment. At the same time, Fat Man is surrounded by grotesque images of sexuality, including Jester and Lucy’s equine performance. However, Fat Man takes no part in these bizarre enactments of sexual potency. He is clearly isolated in his cage, only able to act out his own sterile and death-oriented version of grotesqueness. The entire scene, of course, is orchestrated by Dolly, who “stood beside the open door of the cage” before Fat Man’s ascent (211). Clearly, she has won. Her tourist trap is a booming success, and Fat Man has completely lost control of Garden Hills. This final scene caps the transition of power that Dolly initiates and completes the skein of grotesque images that runs throughout Naked in Garden Hills. Fat Man’s grotesque and profoundly unhealthy body is mocked, beaten, laughed at, and made into a tourist attraction. In this way, this last scene shows Fat Man truly epitomizing the debasement and destruction at the heart of grotesque realism. Concurrently, Dolly charges the scene with grotesque images of
sexual power. In this sense, she balances the death that Fat Man represents with a vision of what Bakhtin calls “a new birth” (21). In this way, *Naked in Garden Hills*’s final scene completes the economic narrative that runs throughout the book and seals the parallel development of grotesque imagery with which it coexists and interacts.⁵
Of course, Dolly’s regeneration does not install a perfect world in Garden Hills. Crews makes this clear in an interview with Anne Foata when he describes the new way of life that she brings to the town as “a mindless, exhibitionist, humanless, loveless, violent way of surviving” (“Interview with Harry Crews 46). Indeed, the picture that Naked in Garden Hills’s closing sequence paints is far from utopian. However, Dolly certainly does reenergize the economy of the town; after finding employment with Dolly, for example, Wes’s “heart sang with a happiness that he had not known in years” and he has “money in his pocket” (133). It is this regeneration that Naked in Garden Hills’s engagements with Bakhtinian grotesquerie frame. The novel absolutely does contain a number of unhappy people, and the social malaise frequently associated with modernity does not lurk far beneath the surface of the text. However, the workings of the novel’s grotesque bodies are not exclusively confined to what Jeff Abernathy describes as a “means to selfhood” in a modern social landscape devastated by “industry and commerce” (76). Still less are they exclusively limited to reflections of what Carol Elizabeth Lamb might call “spiritual emptiness” or consequences of Crews’s “exaggerating the futility and hopelessness of man’s existence in a world devoid of meaning” (86, 72). As Bakhtin observes, the “bodily element” on which “grotesque realism” rests “is deeply positive” (19). Accordingly, while Naked in Garden Hills contains bizarre, unhealthy, and debased bodies, those same bodies also participate in an economy of symbols that teems with regenerative energy. Fat Man’s extreme obesity allows for the mocking and the ultimate subjugation and supplanting of a dead
social order. Further, his impotence points forward toward a new order that offers some degree of purpose and hope to Garden Hills’s citizens. Jester’s sexualized preoccupation with horses might inspire disgust in some readers. However, the virility that his animalistic sexuality intimates helps to signal a reversal of the decay that defines Fat Man’s reign. Along similar lines, Dolly’s grotesque fixation with her own virginity and with her intended sexual conquest of Fat Man helps to bring about and give thematic shape to the takeover and regeneration of Garden Hills that she leads. Each one of these characters engages in the symbolic system of what Bakhtin calls “the lower stratum of the body” in such a way that unequivocally “digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (21) In this sense, the grotesque bodies of Naked in Garden Hills do not simply symbolize the unhappiness of an unfortunate group of people. Rather, by exploiting the ambivalences inherent in grotesquerie, Crews also uses the grotesque bodies that fill his book to illustrate and effect the regeneration of Garden Hills’s socioeconomic order.
NOTES

1. Dolly’s name presents *Naked in Garden Hills*’s modern readers with an anachronistic but amusing coincidence. In 1961, Grover, Spencer, and Harry Robbins established a tourist attraction named “Rebel Railroad” in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee (Hollis 120-121). In 1964, the enterprise was renamed “Goldrush Junction” and reoriented around mining and its associated excitement (Hollis 122). Following a few further transformations, Dolly Parton eventually become involved with the park, which took on the name “Dollywood” in 1986 (Hollis 132). Obviously, given *Naked in Garden Hills*’s 1969 publication date, Crews could not have had this historical harmony in mind while composing his novel. However, considering Dolly’s role in the establishment of Garden Hills’s tourism industry and the town’s earlier reliance on mining, the parallel can certainly be of interest to contemporary readers.

2. That Harry Crews would devote so much attention to a particular socioeconomic change in one of his novels comes as no surprise. At several points throughout his career, Crews showed an open interest in the entanglement of economics and literature. For example, Crews noted in one interview that, while he prefers not to think of himself as someone who produces “thesis novels or tract novels,” all novels “will make an economic statement because the people in them have to get their bread somehow” (“Harry Crews: An Interview” 108). Crews has also pointed toward specific economic statements in his books. In a 1972 interview with Anne Foata, for example, Crews explained that, in making *Karate is a Thing of the Spirit*, he realized that he “could use karate as a kind of metaphor in which to inform much of what I see about mid-twentieth-century America” (“Interview with Harry Crews” 44). Crews has also acknowledged
similar preoccupations in *Naked in Garden Hills*; he states in the same interview with Anne Foata, for example, that in *Naked in Garden Hills* he “meant to stress the fact that we are caught, all of us, the rich men as well as the poor, in a world we partially made but did not make, we partially understand and do not understand” (“Interview with Harry Crews” 46). Additionally, several critics have taken note of Crews’s interest in economics and economic themes. For example, in “Literary Criticism and the Fate of Ideas: The Case of Harry Crews,” Gary L. Long and Larry W. DeBord assert that many of Crews’s books “cohere around the theme of social mobility,” “describe the enduring effects of class,” and “detail the course of change in the twentieth century from the point of view of those at the bottom of the social order” (70, 71, 71). Further, multiple critics have specifically noted *Naked in Garden Hills*’s emphasis on economics, class dynamics, and social change. Long and DeBord, for example, highlight in “Literary Criticism and the Fate of Ideas: The Case of Harry Crews” the importance of “the change from agricultural to industrial values and from subsistence to individual achievement” in the novel, among three others (70). Similarly, in “Silences, Criticisms, and Laments: Political Implications of Harry Crews’s Work,” Long presents *Naked in Garden Hills*’s, among other novels’, inclusion of individuals who “believe in success and persevere in the face of adversity” as part of a broader foregrounding of socioeconomic “mobility” (48). Similar readings appear in Gary L. Long’s “Naked Americans: Violence in the Work of Harry Crews.” Long claims, for example, that Crews “has attacked contemporary American society for” promoting “upward mobility as a universal hope” in *Naked in Garden Hills* and other books (“Naked Americans: Violence in the Work of Harry Crews” 117, 118). Long also foregrounds the roles played by “the tourist,” which Long sees, at least in part, as “a metaphor for modern Americans” (“Naked Americans: Violence in the Work of Harry Crews” 122). In “Harry Crews on the American Dream,” Gary L. Long and
Larry W. DeBord look at the theme of mobility in many of Crews’s works and number *Naked in Garden Hills* among Crews’s novels that “explore how beliefs and practices that fail most people are sustained” (35). Long and DeBord also state that in *Naked in Garden Hills*, among other works, the writer “leaves the domain of psychology for social history and broadens his vision to include public illusions and culture in transition” (“Harry Crews on the American Dream” 41). They further note the preoccupation of some of Crews’s works, including *Naked in Garden Hills*, with “change from agricultural to industrial values and from subsistence to individual achievement” (Long and DeBord, “Harry Crews on the American Dream” 41-42). Long and DeBord also emphasize how Dolly “began to transition Garden Hills into a roadside attraction” and brought economic rejuvenation to the area (“Harry Crews on the American Dream” 49). They also note how Dolly’s “success” causes Fat Man to lose “control” over both Jester and the town (Long and DeBord, “Harry Crews on the American Dream” 50). For Long and DeBord, Dolly “is well-trained to follow Jack O’Boylan’s legacy and to package destruction as creation—to use the people of Garden Hills in the name of progress and profit” (“Harry Crews on the American Dream” 50). In “Nature, Phosphate, and Harry Crews’s *Naked in Garden Hills*,” Keith Huneycutt claims that Crews’s book “develops concerns” that center on “economic and social injustice” and are rooted in discernable historical circumstances (264). In “Harry Crews: Man’s Search for Perfection,” Frank W. Shelton explores O’Boylan’s departure, the regeneration that Dolly brings, and the important role played by “tourists” (103). Shelton particularly foregrounds how “Dolly offers hope in a heretofore hopeless world” (103). Shelton also examines the process by which power is transferred in Garden Hills from Fat Man to Dolly, how Dolly “subdues” Fat Man, and how Jester changes his allegiances (103).
3. Many critics have noted a preoccupation with the body in Harry Crews’s writings. In “Crews’s Freaks,” for example, David K. Jeffrey highlights the presence of “dwarfs, midgets, fat men, geeks, and alligator boys with scabrous flesh” in Crews’s books and analyzes “Crews’s use of freaks both structurally and thematically in the five of his novels in which they appear” (67, 71). In “Silences, Criticisms, and Laments: The Political Implications of Harry Crews’s Work,” Gary L. Long explores ways in which Crews expresses a view of “meaning” as “body-centered, grounded in the tactile and the tangible” in his works (58). In “The Use of I, Lovely and Terrifying Word: Autobiographical Authority and the Representation of ‘Redneck’ Masculinity in A Childhood,” James H. Watkins describes how “bodily deformations function as signs of ‘difference’” in Crews’s A Childhood: Biography of a Place (23). Frank W. Shelton offers readings of the presence of strange bodies in a wide variety of Crews’s works in “Hary Crews: Man’s Search for Perfection.” For Shelton, in Crews’s writings, “normality becomes a meaningless term” (99). For Shelton, Crews’s use of strange bodies generally connects with his interest in religion, perfection, and imperfection; in Shelton’s words, “Crews's use of freaks with imperfect bodies strongly enforces his theme of the human desire for perfection” and an individual’s “imperfection, manifested in the body, conflicts with his yearning for spiritual perfection” (100). In “Harry Crews on the American Dream,” Gary L. Long and Larry W. DeBord explore a number of unusual bodies in Crews’s books; they particularly emphasize, for example, that in his books, “characters, whether freakish or normal, are overshadowed by a bizarre society” (53). Wendy Pearce Miller’s “Right Now Body is Everything: Harry Crews’s Representation of Poor-White Culture in Body” examines relationships between “poor whiteness” and “the body” in Crews’s novel Body as well as the treatment of “the imperfection inherent in the poor-white body” in Crews’s A Childhood: Biography of a Place (18, 18, 16). In
a doctoral dissertation titled “The Body Shop: The Politics and Poetics of Transformation,” Laurie Ann Nardone offers extended engagements with the body’s significance and significations in *Body* from a broadly feminist perspective. In another treatment of Crews’s *Body*, Stephen Want’s “The (Over)exposed Body: Harry Crews’s *Body*” provides investigations of “Crews’s treatment of gendered bodies,” “the connections Crews highlights between bodybuilding and the disciplining of bodies for the purpose of labor and consumption in a capitalist economy,” as well as the “regional intensity” of “Crews’s idiosyncratic representation of the body and bodybuilding” (156). In her 1983 MA thesis, “A Comical Treatment of the Grotesque by Three Southern Writers: Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Harry Crews,” Carol Elizabeth Lamb offers readings of the machinations of unusual bodies in a handful of Crews’s works. Lamb focuses on the workings of the grotesque in Crews’s *The Gospel Singer* and *This Thing Don’t Lead to Heaven*, in addition to the explorations of *Naked in Garden Hills* that she proposes, which are discussed in the first chapter of this project and later in this note. Overall, Lamb’s arguments center on Crews’s “physical and spiritual freaks who wander aimlessly through life searching for something in which to believe” and on how Crews “creates the grotesque by exaggerating the futility and hopelessness of man’s existence in a world devoid of meaning” (72). In an MA thesis titled “Movement Toward Continuity: The Body’s Ordeal in the Novels of Harry Crews,” Angel Michelle Ysaguirre offers readings of the body’s performances, meanings, and functions in several of Crews’s books, with an emphasis on *Car, A Feast of Snakes*, and *Body*. Ysaguirre particularly foregrounds the body’s relationship to “spirituality” and highlights the ways in which the bodies that populate Crews’s novels mark migrations along a spectrum from “continuity” to “discontinuity” (8, 21, 21). Much of Ysaguirre’s piece hinges around the ideas of Georges Bataille. Ysaguirre also underscores the
presence of atypical bodies in Crews’s works, which generally are presented as signifying a parallel but intangible aberration of the mind or the spirit; for Ysaguirre, “Crews draws the body’s exterior to represent inner conditions,” and “physically deformed characters mirror inner-deformed readers, whether those deformities are emotional, sexual, or religious” (3). Ysaguirre elects not to spend much ink on *Naked in Garden Hills*, numbering it among Crews’s works in which corporeality “is something owned and offered to God” and “not something characters use to transcend their discontinuous existence” (8). In many ways, however, the bodies of *Naked in Garden Hills* do help to bridge the socioeconomic disruption engendered by the collapse of Garden Hills’s mining industry, as discussed in the third chapter of this document. Accordingly, the unusual bodies that populate *Naked in Garden Hills*’s pages could be seen as routes to certain forms of continuity, although perhaps not the sort of continuity in which Ysaguirre’s thesis is interested. However, multiple critics have noticed and analyzed the presence of unusual bodies in *Naked in Garden Hills* in particular. David K. Jeffrey, for example, discusses “Jester, a ninety-pound black midget jockey” and “Mayhugh Aaaron, five feet tall and six hundred pounds of Fat Man” and claims that Crews’s “adoption of their points of view and fine manipulation of the novel’s affective structure make the humanity of the freaks evident without polemic” (71, 71, 75). Later, Keith Huneycutt, building on readings of the novel’s strikingly unusual cast of characters that other scholars have previously offered, proposes that “Crews suggests that the degraded environment of Garden Hills and the industrial processes that caused it have damaged the people living in it in a literal sense” and that Jack O’Boylan’s phosphate “mining operation therefore has caused the degradation of the characters, at least in part” (264). Jeff Abernathy and Carol Elizabeth Lamb also focus on *Naked in Garden Hills*’s emphasis on unusual bodies, as discussed in this work’s introductory chapter. Carol Elizabeth Lamb in particular highlights
Jester and Lucy’s participations in “a freak show,” Lucy’s status as “a nymphomaniac,” and the fact that Jester “fails to perceive the difference between a woman, a chair and a horse” (88). In addition, Lamb also mentions Jester’s small “size” and the contrastingly large size of Fat Man’s “grotesque body” (87, 90). Frank W. Shelton’s “Harry Crews: Man’s Search for Perfection” offers relatively brief engagements with Fat Man’s large body and “uncontrollable binges of Metrecal drinking” and Jester’s sexual interactions with Lucy “in a travesty of horsemanship” (103, 104). For Shelton, overall, within “the Darwinian godless world of the novel, man's desire to find meaning in his life leads to degradation, exploitation and the denial of love” (104). Other discussions of prior critical engagements with the body’s performances in Naked in Garden Hills can be found throughout the body of this project’s text, particularly in its first chapter.

4. The application of Bakhtin’s theories to the writings of Harry Crews may at first seem anachronistic. Bakhtin’s specific concern with Rabelais situates his insights within the bounds of particular historical circumstances. Indeed, Bakhtin himself openly acknowledged the temporal restrictions of his book’s augments, for example presenting “medieval parody” as meaningfully distant from “the purely formalist literary parody of modern times, which has a solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence” (21). However, while Crews might be removed from the chronological boundaries that delineate Bakhtin’s subject matter, he does seem to be in conversation with the means of expression that Bakhtin explores. In other words, while Crews’s work might not neatly fit into the frame of Bakhtin’s argument, he does productively engage with a stockpile of images and metaphors similar to the collection of figures and ideas that Bakhtin locates in grotesque realism in general and the work of Rabelais in particular. These similarities should be made clear by the many connections drawn between Naked in Garden Hills and Rabelais and His World in this paper’s third section. Consequently,
while Bakhtin may not have had writers like Crews in mind while composing *Rabelais and His World*, the theories and reading methods that Bakhtin applies can still illuminate *Naked in Garden Hills*. Further, the relevance of Bakhtin’s ideas to the study of Harry Crews’s work finds attestation in the use made of Bakhtinian insights by some of Crews’s critics. Jerrilyn McGregor’s “Harry Crews’s Home Place: An Excursion into Wiregrass Country and the Carnivalesque,” for example, features extended applications of Bakhtin’s ideas to multiple works by Harry Crews, including *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*. In a similar way, in “Carnivalesque Rituals and the Theological Grotesque in the Southern Novels of Harry Crews and Cormac McCarthy,” Maxime Lachaud employs Bakhtin’s theories while developing readings of many of Crews’s books, in addition to several works by Cormac McCarthy; Lachaud does not, however, contend with the Bakhtinian dimensions of *Naked in Garden Hills*. “The Body Shop: The Politics and Poetics of Transformation,” a doctoral dissertation written by Laurie Ann Nardone, also leans to a degree on Bakhtin’s ideas in its engagements with Crews’s *Body*. Additionally, Angel Michelle Ysaguirre’s MA thesis, “Movement Toward Continuity: The Body’s Ordeal in the Novels of Harry Crews,” makes productive use of the theories and reading strategies that Bakhtin proposes in *Rabelais and His World*, especially in its third chapter on Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes*.

5. Perhaps more than any other section of *Naked in Garden Hills*, this scene forces the admission of a limitation in this project’s overarching arguments. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger warns against the dangers inherent in overdetermined readings of the social and political valence of grotesque bodies. In her book’s eighth chapter, for example, Yaeger brings up a “formal property of the grotesque” that centers on “its brutal physicality, its propensity for somatic revulsion and rapture,
its refusal to make friends with the social” (228). She then goes on to claim that, at least in some ways, grotesquerie’s “disgusting protuberances are sticky and ecstatic, winsome and unbearable, rapturous and offensive” and “refuse to speak to (that is, they refuse even to refuse) the order of things” (228). Borrowing from and interacting with ideas proposed by Slavoj Zizek, Yaeger states that the “revulsion” that may emerge in encountering the grotesque can inspire one to “overreact to this stimulus by reducing repulsive characters to their social or regional components, making the body a civic cipher, an infectious carrier of regional or national crisis” (229). In other words, for Yaeger, “the political mapping of the grotesque’s physical coordinates can itself be mapped as a reaction-formation, a defense against anxieties about bodily waste and decay” (229). Again making use of Zizek’s insights, Yaeger then states that, when a reader steps away from this temptation to reductively allegorize the grotesque, grotesquerie “becomes the endpoint, the unreadable mystery of the random violence visited on all human flesh” (230). Accordingly, in Yaeger’s words, “the ungainly body cannot be integrated into the particulars of any regional political theory; it does not offer a threshold but repudiates the consolation of social critique” (230). Yaeger then goes on to propose another “model for interpreting the southern grotesque” that strives to bypass the interpretive dead end of the grotesque’s essential opacity (230). However, within the bounds of this project, Yaeger’s implementation of Zizek’s insights certainly does pose problems. If the grotesque inherently invites misdirected readings of the body’s social meanings, the overall trajectory of this paper’s argument might be misaimed. The reading of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s closing scene offered above might stand as a particularly illustrative example. The passage certainly can inspire revulsion; the same scene features violence, Jester and Lucy engaged in a bizarrely animalistic sexual act, and Fat Man being tempted by “a standing rib roast, steaming yellow corn awash in puddles of butter, loaves of
bread, and a pitcher of Metrecal” (211). In treating this closing section as a final rejection of Fat Man’s rule and a valorization of Dolly’s new socioeconomic order, this paper risks supplanting the shock generated by this scene’s participations in grotesquerie with an unsuitably palpable and reductively narrow social reading. However, in many ways, *Naked in Garden Hills* does appear to invite such socioeconomic interpretations. As the first paragraph of this paper reveals, the main storyline of *Naked in Garden Hills* frames the book as a whole within a socioeconomic narrative. As such, the act of interpreting *Naked in Garden Hills*’s grotesque elements through a social lens meets with a broad justification in the structure of the work as a whole. At the same time, such an interpretation does sacrifice at least some of the visceral jolt that this closing passage’s corporeal excesses inspire. To be sure, perhaps no interpretive act could ever completely encapsulate every meaning imparted by this final section’s participations in grotesquerie; as is often the case, the grotesque bodies and images that pervade this closing passage are too unruly, too startling, and too bizarre to sit comfortably under a single totalizing reading. Indeed, other critics have produced differing but valid interpretations of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s last scene; Jeffrey, Abernathy, Lamb, for example, have all offered legitimate and useful engagements with *Naked in Garden Hills*’s closing sequence that do not explicitly rely on Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque body. Accordingly, while a Bakhtinian reading of this final section might illuminate some of the meanings that the book’s ending imparts, it cannot claim to offer a final, definitive, and totalizing interpretation of this scene’s grotesque features. Indeed, the same could be said of any point where this project aims to find a social or economic signification behind the excesses of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s grotesque bodies. While this project’s engagements with Bakhtin’s theories might help to throw light on some of the meanings that surround the novel’s grotesque bodies and on the overarching thematic and
narratological structure of the book as a whole, it should not be seen as an attempt to provide a complete encapsulation of the workings and significance of the novel’s engagements with grotesquerie to the exclusion of any other possible reading. Rather, this paper aims to offer a reading of *Naked in Garden Hills*’s grotesque bodies that could potentially coexist alongside additional and distinct readings of those same unusual bodies. To assume that a Bakhtinian reading of *Naked in Garden Hills* could fully and definitively explain the book’s uses of the grotesque would be to assume that the grotesque possess a solidity and an internal coherence that runs counter to its slippery, hyperbolic, and essentially confounding nature.
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