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Autobiography and the Search for Identity in the Work of Harry Crews, Tim McLaurin and Rick Bragg

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of autobiography in the work of three contemporary writers from the American Deep South. All three grew up in extreme poverty as the sons of southern sharecroppers and represent a class of people who featured regularly in the literature of the region but who were not expected to write it. That their voices are now heard at all is part of a reassessment process referred to by the novelist and critic Doris Betts as reflecting "national trends in a democracy where most "new voices" speak up in turn from population groups heretofore considered artistically mute" (Dunn and Preston, 1991, p. 166). The work of Harry Crews (1978), Tim McLaurin (1991), and Rick Bragg (1997) effectively contribute to a democratisation process that began in southern literature after de-segregation and the election in 1976 of a southern president, Jimmy Carter. Prior to this, the plight of the southern rural poor was articulated mainly by educated, middle-class white writers; a critical and moral dilemma that few appeared to recognise. The memoirs of Crews, Bragg, and McLaurin therefore offer a fresh perspective on the economic and social predicament of their own poor white people, a viewpoint that also encompasses a more personal struggle to come to terms with their own identities. They cite membership of this marginalised and much-maligned minority as the source of their authority to re-write the 'official' history of the southern poor white and to validate their memories.

For Crews, Bragg, and McLaurin, autobiography acts as a means both to conserve the past and to define the present in modern southern society. It allows them to shape their very personal responses to changing circumstances, thereby modifying or supplanting the established cultural mythology. The writing down of these memories is also crucial in achieving a sense of selfhood. The desperate poverty of their respective upbringings and the contempt with which their people are generally regarded by the wider American population have contributed to a loss of self-esteem and identity in each man. Each memoir therefore strives to strike a particular balance. Each mourns the loss of a stoical, and often honourable, poor white world while experiential authority also allows for the fierce criticism of the system of class and gender oppression that made their families' lives so difficult.

All three men grew up on the margins of a society forever disposed to treat them both as second-class and as stereotypes. Crews is the oldest of the three, born in 1935, and

his earliest memories are therefore of severe Depression-era poverty. In his 1978 work, *A Childhood: Biography of a Place,* he provides an account of "a way of life gone forever out of the world" (Crews, 1978, p.6). Despite the austerity of his childhood and his long self-imposed exile from home, he feels compelled to return there in adulthood, seeking to revisit his family history, in particular that of his father, who died before he was born. The latter appears to be of particular importance in determining his own identity. When the adult Crews meets his father's friends in the local store, the scene is therefore presented as

> . . . a rite of passage in which the narrator inherits not only a sense of geographical and cultural belonging but also a more secure position within a patriarchal order anchored in that geography and culture.

The above quotation from Watkins (2001, p.17) confirms the importance of 'home' in southern literature as a means of self-identification. Crews uses the men's memories of his father to establish his own place within this narrow world. The fact that his memoir is entitled *A Childhood: Biography of a Place* rather than, say, *Harry Crews: An Autobiography* is also indicative of the significance he assigns to the iconic notion of the home place in the collective memories of his people.

McLaurin's *Keeper of the Moon* (1991) makes the same associations. It begins and ends with a pantheistic paean to the beauty of southern nature, proffering love of the land as one of the more positive facets of the poor white character. McLaurin goes further when he declares that "I am still joined by something sacred to Southern country mornings", a statement that elevates his emotional bond to the level of religious experience (McLaurin, 1991, p.19). Although the landscapes of Crews's Georgia and Bragg's Alabama are wilder and harsher, they nonetheless elicit the same "deep, even if despairing respect" from their inhabitants, who live lives that are "full, rich, original and real, but harsh, hard, mean as a damn snake" (Bragg, 1997, p.4). Each man uses his narrative to describe "the relationship between the essential qualities of the land and the character of the people who live there" (Watkins, 2001, p.22). Such a relationship inevitably produces conflicting emotions, a dilemma that McLaurin summarises as typical of the southern rural life where "a fine line exists between being loved and being beaten to death" (McLaurin, 1991, p.21). Howarth (1990, p.130) therefore refers to southern autobiography as a genre in which "personal and regional fortunes persistently intertwine", thereby delivering to the writer "a particularly sharp sense of place and of the voice needed to love/hate it".

A large family is considered the second measure of a man's identity and self-esteem: "a man who had no family who had no roots and no responsibilities was no man at all" (Bragg, 1997, p.84). Crews also believes that without family or land "nothing else was certain" and "very little will ever be yours, really *belong* to you in the world" (1978, p.16). In his introduction to *Home Ground: Southern Autobiography,* Berry (1991, p.7) remarks that:

> For southern autobiographers the place held by family is in part an artefact of a society with an aristocratic ideal, where status was based on family and race rather than on merit or money. Family remains central insofar as the South remains rural, with a rural culture's interplay of generations and (valuing sociability, lacking other amusements) reliance on storytelling.

The strength of this tradition underpins the work of all three men and explains the need to return to their respective homes, to share in the "collective experience" of their families and in "their understanding of who they are" (Crews, 1978, p.6). Academic and literary success in adulthood grants each the voice and the opportunity to "rehabilitate the derogatory stereotypes ascribed to them [their people] by using language to fashion an identity as honest, hard-working folks" (Watkins, 2001, p.17). Portraying their families and neighbours as the [mainly] honourable poor also serves to bolster their own self-belief as they continue to seek the sense of cultural identity vital to a more secure position within the southern patriarchal order. Each man therefore describes both the admirable qualities and the shortcomings of their forbears.

Crews asks his readers to understand the level of desperation that would drive a friend to steal food from the family as they bury Crews's father (1978, p.47):

> He was a friend, and a close one, but he stole the meat anyway. Not many people may be able to understand that or sympathize with it, but I think I do. It was a hard time in that land, and a lot of men did things for which they were ashamed and suffered for the rest of their lives. But they did them because of hunger and sickness and because they could not bear the sorry spectacle of their children dying from lack of a doctor and their wives growing old before they were thirty.

In accordance with the values of the day, Crews refrains from naming the thief, thus preserving his honour, a vital attribute among those with so little else to offer. The desperate suffering experienced in this community as a result of poverty ensures that the thief's actions are regarded with a certain moral ambivalence, examples of which feature regularly in each man's memoir. The need to survive is paramount and often overrides what might be considered normal moral considerations. Throughout their memoirs Crews, Bragg, and McLaurin strive to assign legitimacy to a class of people traditionally marginalised by mainstream culture. By portraying them as worthy of understanding, each 'can then make his readers aware of the core of humanity that is revealed in their failures.' (Betts cited in Powell, 2000, p.110).

As a child, Crews hones his survival skills through the art of storytelling and his reliance on it in writing this memoir raises some questions about the notion of truth. Describing his feelings about his parents' separation, for example, he states:

> I knew that it was not true, that it was made up, and that also it was a kind of cheating to go about pretending you were what you were not. But there seemed to be no alternative .... The only way to deal with the real world was to challenge it with one of your own making." [emphasis mine] (Crews, 1978, p.135).

The final sentence of this extract seems to be an important comment on these particular autobiographies. Many of the episodes Crews describes take place when he was too young to remember them and are often difficult to believe, given his age at the time. When he begins the memoir with the words, "my first memory is of a time ten years before I was born, and the memory takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy, whom I never knew", he instantly raises questions regarding truthfulness (Crews, 1978, p.3). Crews confronts the issue himself when he asks "did what I have set down here as memory actually happen?" He then answers his own question with the words "I do not know, nor do I any longer care". This is perhaps why Papovich (1986, p.28) refers to *A Childhood* as consisting of a "mixture of fact, legend and personal memory". Much of it is reconstructed from the memories of others, through stories told by family and neighbours that are accepted as truth. Crews (1978, p.3) thereby acknowledges the importance of the oral tradition in the culture of the southern poor:

> . . . the rest of it came down to me through the mouths of more people than I could name. And I have lived with the stories for so long that they are as true as anything that actually happened.

As a child, he takes refuge in storytelling to protect himself from the "vicious happenings" that characterised his world, and as an adult he recognises that "making up stories was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it" (Crews, 1978, p.62). When, out of necessity, fantasy becomes a way of life as a shield against reality, it is perhaps understandable that notions of truth in this work become unstable. Each of these writers is actively engaged in the Herculean task of refuting long-established beliefs about the social class into which they were born. They strive to rehabilitate an often-despised group of people in the national consciousness, while at the same time giving a full, and often angry, account of the dreadful poverty that dominated their respective childhoods. Personal bias must therefore be taken into account.

Of course, the nature of autobiography *per se* implies a multifaceted and often biased approach to the truth, as writers recall memories from their past, rewriting them to suit a particular purpose. In reviewing *Keeper of the Moon* for the *New York Times* (Book Section) in 1992, Rob Dew comments that "I've never entirely trusted the truth that a memoir purports to tell." Laura Marcus (cited in Swindell, 1995, p.14) alludes to the same problem when she remarks that:

> the genre of autobiography is. . . a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction.

In any of the three texts under consideration here, who can say with any certainty what is actual memory and what is fiction? The genre of memoir inevitably provokes a complex discourse regarding perceptions of truth, which cannot be fully discussed in this paper. The achievement of these three particular autobiographies may simply lie in the realisation of

a collective or generally accepted truth: one that actively celebrates poor whites while at the same time criticising the conditions they have endured. The constant emphasis on the interplay between brutal poverty and the essential humanity of the people who endure it sustains and elevates their memory. Each man provides countless examples of the tensions that arise when decent people are forced to live often desperate lives. Crews, Bragg, and McLaurin all succeed in commemorating their forbears with dignity, while at the same time acknowledging their very human faults in the context of a hostile social and physical environment.

Tension also exists between writers of autobiographies and their subjects. Powell (2000, p.110) cites Doris Betts, who taught McLaurin at the University of North Carolina, remarking that:

> he had this feeling that the story of his people had not been told. [His people] know he's a writer, but I don't think they understand it; it puzzles them really. He's one of them, and yet he's not one of them.

In the case of Crews, Seelye (1980, p.625) refers to this disjunction as a "cultural schizophrenia". In many respects, the schizophrenia results from the differences between these writers own life experiences as adults and their continuing loyalty to the communities of their childhoods, between memory and actuality. Shelton (1984, p.135) alludes to the tension between Crews' two disparate lifestyles:

> . . . one part of him remains deep in the Southern soil of his 'grit' childhood and wants to remain there. But given his adult experiences, especially teaching for many years at the University of Florida, another part of him is firmly situated in modern urban America.

Crews confirms the dichotomy himself: "For half my life I have been in the university, but never of it. Never *of* anywhere, really. Except the place I left, and that of necessity only in memory" (Crews, 1978, p.25). That same sense of rootlessness also pervades the work of Bragg and McLaurin, both of whom share Crews' need to understand his adult persona in the context of his poor white childhood and to resolve the resultant pressures.

Marcus's proposal, that autobiography can operate as "a magical instrument of reconciliation" (cited in Swindell, 1995, p.14), may be somewhat overstated in the case of the three writers considered here, but there is a sense that Crews and McLaurin have resolved some of their identity issues through the process. Indeed, Crews has remarked in interview on his early failures to make a living as a writer of fiction because he had been ashamed of his upbringing. Only when he confronted and accepted his heritage as a poor white sharecropper was he able to achieve success. Shelton (1984, p.102) believes that *A Childhood* therefore represents "his testament of acceptance and affection for his rural background and for rural people". By implication, it also represents self-acceptance and a means of making peace with his own identity. Crews has always denied that his memoir sings "a sad song for the bad good old days", but rather insists that it is an essential portrayal of

"a hard time in the shaping of the South, a necessary experience that made us the unique people we are" (cited in Cobb, 1996, p.14).

Simultaneously, he also taps into the culture of contemporary consumerism, re-creating a world he knows will appeal to those modern tourists who seek the South of popular imagination. References to the grocery store, "with Pepsi-Cola and root beer and Redman Chewing Tobacco and snuff signs nailed all over it" (Crews, 1978, p.19), recall Walker Evans's photographs of small town stores throughout the South during the Depression (Agee and Evans, 1988). Bragg (1997, p.67) is critical of the way in which such imagery is now being recycled for popular consumption and resents the fashionable appropriation of his memories. He believes it is only a matter of time before the old, ruined store of his childhood will attract the attention of "some Yankee photographer" who "will drive past, see it as quaint and put a picture of it in a coffee-table book. That is where a big part of the Old South is, on coffee tables in Greenwich Village." Such cultural misrepresentation re-constructs the issues of economic marginality represented by the original photographs and by the memoirs considered in this paper in a manner that contrives to deny the human suffering that prompted their original commission.

In this respect, Bragg is perhaps the most bitter of the three writers and his adult persona continues to be greatly influenced by childhood memories of poverty and shame. As a young reporter he is angered by the presence of Ivy League-educated "pointy heads who came South for the invaluable experience they would glean from writing about people that some of them held largely in contempt" (Bragg, 1997, p.139). For these visitors, the South and its people represent a "tour of duty in the heart of darkness", the Conrad reference implying gothic horror and savagery (Bragg, 1997, p.141). He reacts by fleeing the South and, like Crews and McLaurin, he travels a great distance from the home place, both geographically and socially. However, his emotional and cultural identities remain inextricably linked to his childhood world. Writing his mother's history allows him to confront the legacy of his poor white heritage but he seems unwilling or unable to make peace with that past. As a result, he is the only one of the three who still appears to retain a chip on his shoulder "about the size of a concrete block" (Bragg, 1997, p.141). McLaurin does not document the same level of shame at his family's poverty and his reminiscing is gentler in tone. By the end of *A Childhood,* Crews also appears to achieve a measure of stability, simply accepting that "it would be forever impossible to leave them [his people] completely. Wherever I go in the world, they would go with me." (Crews, 1978, p.182).

In conclusion, the autobiographies examined here illustrate the importance of memory, both on a personal and a wider cultural level. Firstly, they represent empowerment, a means to give voice and value to a particular section of the underclass. They celebrate hard-working but disenfranchised plain folk, effectively preserving the character for future generations. Despite the questions raised about truthfulness, the very act of writing memoirs serves to validate the historical experiences of an entire class of poor white south-

erners and in so doing the three writers ask important questions regarding the morality and ethics of a nation that has tolerated and, in general, condoned such poverty. On a secondary level, the memoirs act as a means to ease, if not fully resolve, the personal tensions that exist between past and present. In order to understand his own status as a white southerner in the twenty-first century, each man must first locate himself retrospectively in the context of his poor white upbringing. Each therefore uses the genre to bridge the gap between the agrarian South of his childhood and the post-modern South of adulthood. Memory is often employed as a tool in the search for identity but for Crews, Bragg, and McLaurin, the two concepts are intimately linked: the achievement of any real sense of selfhood is therefore completely dependent upon confronting the memories and accepting the realities of the past.

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