



2016

## Southern Transfiguration: Competing Cultural Narratives of (Ec)centric Religion in the Works of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Hurston

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Digital Object Identifier: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2016.116>

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### Recommended Citation

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SOUTHERN TRANSFIGURATION: COMPETING CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF  
(EC)CENTRIC RELIGION IN THE WORKS OF FAULKNER, O'CONNOR, AND  
HURSTON

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Craig Desmond Slaven

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Alan Nadel, Professor of English

2016

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### SOUTHERN TRANSFIGURATION: COMPETING CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF (EC)CENTRIC RELIGION IN THE WORKS OF FAULKNER, O'CONNOR, AND HURSTON

This project explores the ways in which key literary texts reproduce, undermine, or otherwise engage with cultural narratives of the so-called Bible Belt. Noting that the evangelicalism that dominated the South by the turn of the twentieth century was, for much of the antebellum period, a relatively marginal and sometimes subversive movement in a comparatively irreligious region, I argue that widely disseminated images and narratives instilled a false sense of nostalgia for an incomplete version of the South's religious heritage. My introductory chapter demonstrates how the South's commemorated "Old Time" religion was not especially old, and how this modernist construct of an idealized past helped galvanize Southern evangelicalism into a religion that more readily accommodated racial hegemony in the present. The following three chapters examine Faulkner's *Light in August*, O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. I find that each of these novels embeds traces of forgotten religious dissidence. The modern nostalgia for a purer old-time religion, my readings suggest, says less about the history of religion in the South than it does about New-South efforts to merge evangelical and "Southern" values, thereby suppressing any residual opposition between them.

KEYWORDS: Southern Literature, Religion, Modernism,  
American Studies, Race Studies

Craig Slaven

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Student's Signature

March 10, 2016

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to my director, Dr. Alan Nadel, for his unwavering support and encouragement, for his high standards, and for his general vote of confidence in my scholarship. My writing, research, and critical outlook have benefited immensely from his mentorship. Thanks to Dr. Roxanne Mountford, Dr. Rynetta Davis, and Dr. Peter Kalliney for their insights and feedback, and to Joanne Melish, who traveled all the way from Rhode Island to attend my exam. I am especially thankful for my guest committee member, Dr. Barbara Ladd, who, having never met me in person prior to the defense, generously corresponded with me and sent invaluable comments on my work. Thanks to the Assistant Dean of the Graduate School, Dr. Morris Grubbs, for his endless support of graduate students and for his role in the Nietzel Visiting Distinguished Faculty Program that allowed us to bring Dr. Ladd to Lexington. I would also like to thank my former faculty mentors at Louisiana State University, Dr. John Lowe, Dr. Brannon Costello, and Dr. Ed White. Without their kindness and guidance, I could have never made it this far.

I am grateful for friends and family who have kept me sane and grounded throughout the years. Thanks to my parents, Gary and Julie Slaven, for their unconditional love and for the countless ways they have invested in my life and my endeavors. Thanks to Brother Gene and Mrs. Nita, who treated me like family long before they ever knew I would one day be their son-in-law. I am forever thankful for their prayers and for their consoling wisdom. To my partner and best friend, Hannah Slaven, you are the smartest, most talented, and most interesting person I know, and sharing life with you makes every achievement so much more meaningful. To our amazing daughters, Story and Day, I have learned more from knowing you and watching you grow than I ever did or could from a book. "Daddy" will always be my most cherished title.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One .....	1
Chapter Two. Below the Bible Belt: Reading Discrepancy Between Southern Nostalgia and Southern History .....	8
Disorder in Early Southern Revivalism .....	10
The Margin in the Middle .....	19
From the Camp Meetings to the Rebel Camps: Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption .....	24
The Antisocial Gospel.....	31
Southern Religion in Black and White .....	34
Chapter Three. Blessed Insurgence: The Repression of Religious Dissent in <i>Light in August</i> .....	40
Overview.....	40
The “chapel back in the hills”: The Forgotten Legacy of Evangelical Dissent in the Hightower Narrative .....	47
Volitionless Servants of Fatality: The Paradox of Evangelical Voluntarism and Cultural Determinism.....	68
Blessed Insurgence; or, Why Every Church Service in <i>Light in August</i> is Interrupted.....	84
Chapter Four. The Prophet as Spectacle: the Limits of Commodified Religion in the Works of Flannery O'Connor.....	92
Chapter Five. “Congo gods talking in Alabama”: Bad Memory, Unauthorized Histories, and the (Un)Making of Southern Religion in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston.....	131
Chapter Six. Conclusion .....	176
References.....	183
Vita.....	193

## Chapter One: Introduction

*There is [...] a 'regionalism' based on pride, which behaves like nationalism. And there is a 'regionalism' based upon condescension, which specializes in the quaint and the eccentric and the picturesque, and which behaves in general like an exploitative industry. These varieties, and their kindred, have in common a dependence on false mythology that tends to generalize and stereotype the life of a region. That is to say it tends to impose false literary or cultural generalizations upon false geographical generalizations. (934)*

-Wendell Berry, "The Regional Motive"

There is perhaps no clearer instance of a regionalism that combines the paradoxical dependence on pride and condescension than that which is signified by the term "the Bible Belt," with its dual connotation of piety and backwardness. Originally coined by H. L. Mencken in the 1920s as a pejorative term for a region populated by uneducated, unenlightened fundamentalists,<sup>1</sup> the term has since been adopted both as an overly literal geography and as a point of cultural pride for those Southerners who view Southern religiosity as a defense against the degenerate, secular nation.

While distinct religious bodies have certainly developed in the southeastern states, and while, as Samuel S. Hill observes, "the continuities [between Southern denominations] are more conspicuous than the discontinuities," which makes it "legitimate to speak of the transdenominational 'Southern church'" (23), the popular concept of a Bible Belt nonetheless functions as a "false mythology" that does as much to

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<sup>1</sup> In a 1926 editorial in *American Mercury*, Mencken writes, "The old game, I suspect, is beginning to play out, even in the Bible Belt. What made the rural Methodists breathe hard and fast at the dawn of the century now only makes them shuffle their feet and cough behind their hands...The yokelry no longer turn out...to gape at colored pictures of the Holy Sepulchre and the Mount of Olives, or to hear a sweating rhetorician on 'The Future of America.' They sicken of Service, Idealism and Vision. What ails them is that the village movie, the radio and the Ku Klux Klan have spoiled their old taste for simple, wholesome fare. They must have it hot now, or they don't want it at all." (292). Mencken regrets that white Southern evangelical churches have been inseparably bound to other degenerate organizations like the Anti-Saloon League and the Ku Klux Klan. He also suggests that the ignorance of the "yokelry" is not innate but has been cultivated by modern Christianity. He acknowledges that these unenlightened citizens, in fact, possess a "native decency" that is greater than that of their religious leaders (292). While condescending, this editorial is considerably more empathic than the 1917 essay "The Sahara of the Bozart" that authors like Flannery O'Connor clearly have in mind when citing Mencken's disdain for the South and its religion.

conceal competing cultural narratives as it does to reveal empirically a superficially homogeneous regional character. Along these lines, we have taken for granted that our understanding of Bible Belt culture derives solely from the religious fabric of the region and not from the assumptions we bring to it. Cultural and literary generalizations of the Bible Belt have given cogency to the “natural” integration of evangelicalism and Southern culture. In the novels and stories I examine, however, religion, rather than being the glue that binds the South together, often signifies an unpredictable element that threatens to tear it apart, for better or for worse. These depictions, I argue, disrupt the illusion of a harmonious marriage between religion and Southern culture.

The conservative evangelical religion that dominated the postbellum South was, in the Old South of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, only a marginal movement. The centralization of this religion, however, contributed to political campaigns to revalorize—or redeem—a distinctive Southern identity that transcended slavery while preserving a way of life cultivated by that peculiar institution. By foregrounding a past in which early evangelical revivalism often challenged the societal norms in the South, my dissertation argues that key twentieth-century Southern texts complicate the notion that Southern religion *inherently* accommodates social hegemony in the region. While several critics have revealed the ways in which modernist Southern literature exposes the dominant religion’s complicity in the problems of Jim Crow, however, few attend to the ways in which evangelicalism in the earlier South was, in many ways, a countercultural movement. Not only did early missionaries and circuit riders insist that slaves were, at the least, spiritual equals who had a right to religious

instruction, but many early nineteenth-century revivals temporarily disrupted rigid social boundaries of race, class, and gender.

Theorizing the tension between *prophetic* forms of religion that provide a disruptively countercultural perspective and *accommodationist* forms of religion that help maintain the status quo, my dissertation argues that the latently prophetic threatens to rupture a carefully crafted image of a coherent and monologic Bible Belt in Southern fiction. In William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, religion does often obscure questions of justice by emphasizing spiritual redemption over issues of social reform; nevertheless, religion almost invariably generates narrative conflict in these works. This narrative tension, I show, reflects a retentive antipathy between eccentric evangelicalism and the social order that later subsumed it. In this light, I explore the ways in which key literary texts reproduce, challenge, or otherwise engage with cultural narratives of the so-called Bible Belt.

My introductory chapter provides the contextual and historical bases for my subsequent readings. In it, I discuss evangelicalism's shift from the margin to the center of Southern culture and focus on the dissonances between modern Southern evangelicalism and its antecedents. Noting that the evangelicalism that dominated the South by the turn of the twentieth century was, for much of the antebellum period, a relatively marginal and sometimes subversive movement in a comparatively irreligious region, I argue that widely disseminated images and narratives instilled a false sense of nostalgia for "Old-Time Religion" that preserves an incomplete version of the South's religious heritage. This nostalgia obscures the more deviant strands of early revivalism,

impeding Southern religion's prophetic function. The following three chapters show how various literary representations of Southern religiosity undermine a romanticized religious heritage by representing religion as a countercultural impetus of narrative conflict rather than a neutral or "natural" facet of the communities represented.

The second chapter examines Faulkner's *Light in August*, in which the obscured legacy of evangelical dissidence threatens to return and undermine accommodationist religion. Seldom mentioned as a significant character, for instance, Hightower's father, the lay minister of a rural church who opposes slavery before the War, comes across as an idiosyncratic exception to the rest of the novel's depiction of postbellum Southern religion as culturally central and socially disengaged. Far from representing an aberration, however, this character represents a forgotten history of evangelical dissent. While the dominant plot certainly implicates religion for accommodating racial injustice, the novel conveys an internalized conflict between a once marginal religious movement and the dominant culture. By briefly alluding to but subsequently repressing a history in which abolitionist and Southern religious perspectives coincided, the novel reenacts the way in which cultural narratives of the Bible Belt impede the Church as a locus of cultural defiance.

The conflict between prophetic and accommodationist religion is also central to my third chapter's analysis of O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, which I argue critiques and parodies national and regional narratives of the exotic South that relegate Southern religion to either the quaint or the absurd. The central character, Hazel Motes, is haunted by his call to become a preacher like his "waspy" evangelist grandfather. Despite resisting this call to prophesy, Haze unwittingly becomes an evangelist in the city of

Taulkinham, where he preaches his anti-gospel from the hood of his car. Haze carries a hidden threat to those around him, just as his grandfather rode with “Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger.” A veteran, Haze believes that the surgeons who operated on him when he was injured in World War II never removed the shrapnel that was inside him; he literally carries enemy ammunition inside his body. Through these images, O'Connor reveals antagonism between her outcast religious fanatics and the communities they ostensibly represent. At the same time, she parodies consumer culture and the ways in which national and regional narratives of the South exoticize and commodify religious fanaticism, not as a threat, but as a spectacle of permissible aberration. Such narratives define Southern religion in the extreme terms of the meaninglessly picturesque or the incoherently grotesque, disallowing representations of a more meaningfully and coherently prophetic Southern religion. Just as *Wise Blood's* exhibitionist Asa Hawks attempts to profit from a sensationalized form of revivalism by advertising his plan to blind himself publically, only to lose his nerve at the last minute, so too, for O'Connor, has a commodified Southern religion lost its prophetic nerve and its ability to function outside of its prescribed grotesquerie. In this way, *Wise Blood* depicts an internal conflict between dissident religion and the minstrel performance of Southernness.

Like *Light in August* and *Wise Blood*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* represent the Church as a site of tension between conflicting pasts. Hurston depicts modern black churches as sites of containment that threaten to reproduce the patriarchal structures of authority inherent in their white counterparts. But the earlier revivalist inclination to defy those strictures manifests itself through her creative and subversive female characters. Hurston's women are the keepers

of forgotten history. In Hurston's retelling of Exodus, Miriam falls asleep and loses sight of the basket containing her newborn brother. Afraid, she tells her parents that the infant was rescued by an Egyptian princess. This tale is circulated and reproduced among the Hebrews until it becomes the patriarchal story of the canon. Thus, Miriam is both integral to and redacted from canonical and patriarchal narratives. This biblical retelling allegorically reflects the development of Black Protestantism in the South. Like Miriam, Hurston's works reveal competing religious histories, concealed in the present by the myth of a purer Old-Time religion that caricaturizes black Christians as submissive and compliant. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Lucy shapes her husband John into a prominent preacher and leader, but when John loses sight of his indebtedness to Lucy and his congregation, he loses his post and position in the community. In these novels, feminine counter-narratives subvert dominant narratives by suggesting alternate and often hybrid religious origins.

Although the implications vary from work to work, the fictional Souths that each of these authors creates both echo and challenge popular preconceptions of the region's religious character. Each of these novels oscillates between the conflicting religious impulses of defiance and compliance in relation to cultural normativity, and their fictional preachers, churches, and communities internalize these dichotomous roles. I find that each of these novels embeds traces of forgotten religious dissidence. The modern nostalgia for a purer old-time religion, this study suggests, says less about the history of religion in the South than it does about New-South efforts to merge evangelical and "Southern" values, thereby suppressing any residual opposition between them. Overdetermined definitions of what Southern religion was, is, and can potentially be have

made it difficult to discern these significant conflicts in Southern literature. Recognizing evangelicalism's protean and dialogic nature, these authors figure religion as both the stable center and the volatile epicenter of Southern culture.

## Chapter Two

### Below the Bible Belt: Reading Discrepancy between Southern Nostalgia and Southern History

Critics who have been concerned with the religious dimensions of Southern literature have proven quite adept at demonstrating how Southern evangelicalism inhibits any form of social activism and reinforces Southern cultural values. Timothy Caron's insightful study of religion and race in Southern literature, for instance, moves, in the space of two pages, from the "incredibly popular revivals and camp-meetings, which were extremely inter-denominational and interracial during the Great Revival," to a "theological homogeneity of the white South's church-goers" that "bolster[s]" segregation by "emphasiz[ing] evangelism over social justice" (11-12). Having glossed over Southern evangelicalism's radically different past, Caron shifts focus to how the literature at hand reflects the reactionary dimensions of white Southern evangelicalism, while discussing dissenting evangelicalism only in regard to black Southern Protestantism. Thus, he fails to account for the interim between the heterogeneously composed Great Revival and the appearance of a homogeneous, segregation-bolstering white Southern religion. Many Southern authors, however, perhaps more cognizant of the dissident tone of early revivalism, also represent conservative white evangelicalism as potentially threatening to the dominant social order. Religious extremism, even when laden with the trappings of Southern racism, must be contained and controlled in these narratives because it undermines the white moderates' romantic view of Southern paternalism. Attention only to the ways in which Southern white religion conforms to the dominant culture ignores how religion itself is culturally defined so as to inhibit religion

from certain types of social engagement and critique. Tacit acceptance of a culturally assimilated form of Southern evangelicalism, therefore, has prevented necessary attention to its long and transformative journey from the margins of Southern society to the center. As Christine Heyrman writes, there was “nothing inevitable about the triumph of evangelicalism in the South,” for it began as an outlying religion of dissent that failed to win over the Southern majority in the decades before and after the Revolutionary War. Eventually, however, evangelicalism would dominate the region, making it difficult to fathom “a world marooned from living memory in which evangelicals, far from dominating the South, were viewed by most whites as odd at best and subversive at worst” (221).

It is important to begin this study, therefore, with a brief sketch of this “marooned” world and, more significantly, the various causes and impetuses of evangelicalism’s cultural takeover following the Civil War, which in turn led to a revisionist sacralization of Southern history. In that context, we can shed new light on how some major Southern authors—William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Flannery O’Connor—examined the tension between and dramatized the paradoxes of an “odd” and “subversive” religion that gradually became normative and dominant throughout the nineteenth century. While the novels I examine are at least partially complicit in representing the South as an inherently religious region of the United States, their conforming to these predetermined images becomes a critique, often a parody, of the conception of the religious South in the national gaze. The Bible Belt, in that sense, is both a descriptive and prescriptive geography; while it is often understood as a deeply reactionary region where religion inhibits progress, these novels suggest that Southern

religion is itself determined by these emergent narratives of the religious South, narratives that in turn limit the ability of religious characters to determine and shape their worlds, since they have already been determined as cultural representatives of an “eccentric” region that can only be understood from afar. This is the inherent paradox that these novels take up in their reflections upon religion in the South: what is eccentric becomes merely another incarnation of what is centric in the undifferentiated South, so that no self-examination of Southern culture from the “extreme” margin of Southern society is possible. The evangelical characters of these novels have been so deeply integrated into the dominant culture that they, like the religious culture they represent, have lost the ability to examine critically Southern culture from the vantage of a peripheral religious experience.

The South was not always characterized by intense religious fervor. The early evangelicalism of the region, as opposed to the conservative Southern evangelicalism of the twentieth century, was a relatively marginal movement that often challenged the prevailing social order. In order to best understand the religious dimensions of Southern fiction, therefore, we need to look not at the ways in which narratives reinforce preconceptions of the Bible Belt and the religious characters who inhabit it but rather the ways in which these novels deconstruct and destabilize a superficially coherent Southern religious experience.

### 1. Disorder in Early Southern Revivalism

Prominently featured in the still-preserved meeting house at Cane Ridge, the site

of the famous 1801 revival in Kentucky, is a reconstructed pulpit.<sup>2</sup> In the style of the time, the pulpit is unlike today's slight and unassuming podiums; it is large and elevated, and it has a stepladder on the side for the minister to ascend. As Roxanne Mountford suggests in her rhetorical analysis of American religious spaces, these traditional pulpits were highly gendered, embodying a masculinized view of religious authority.<sup>3</sup> Also distinctive is the meeting house's balcony or slave gallery. This is where black worshipers traditionally sat, separated from the white congregation below. Stairs have been added for access to the reconstructed balcony, but blacks originally had to climb a ladder and enter through the window.<sup>4</sup> The revival itself, however, like other revivals in the region during this time, undercut these formal and structural divisions. When the revival started, rumors spread and thousands of people gathered there, far more people than the small building could accommodate.

More important than the limited capacity of the meeting house, however, were the symbolic limitations of the gender and racial barriers inherent in the design of the building. Just as the house could not contain the vast crowd of sincere searchers and curious spectators, the social hierarchies that were represented by the layout of the house could not accommodate the revival experience. In the overflow crowd gathered in the open space outdoors, black and white Christians, and men and women, had occasion to worship side by side. As Paul K. Conkin notes, "Equality within the church is of course a

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<sup>2</sup> Cane Ridge was one prominent revival among several others that together represent an "outpouring" that some historians variously call the Second Great Awakening or the Great Revival. This cluster of revivals also represents the beginnings of the Bible Belt according to John B. Boles.

<sup>3</sup> Mountford cites Melville's depiction of Father Maple's pulpit in *Moby Dick* as a hyperbolized version of the traditional lofted pulpit. In the ship-like fortress that Father Maple ascends via a rope ladder, the minister is separated from the congregation. This embellishment ensures that "the reader does not miss the association of masculinity and divinity" (37).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the preservation of the Cane Ridge meeting house, see "Cane Ridge Meeting House." *Hopewellmuseum.org*. Hopewell Museum Historic Paris-Bourbon County, 2012.

Christian imperative, but one whose exact implications have historically divided churches. The revivals of 1801 moved Christians back toward such egalitarian sentiments. The lowered class, racial, and gender barriers in turn explain much of the opposition to the more fervent revivals” (171). Likewise, though more cautiously, Albert Raboteau writes, “The individualistic emphasis of revivalism, with its intense concentration on inward conversion, fostered an inclusiveness which could border on egalitarianism” (132). According to Katherine L. Dvorak, even as late as the 1850s, with the “camp-meeting” having become “more routinized” and “less spectacular” since Cane Ridge, revivals nevertheless remained an interracial and interdenominational phenomenon: “Despite certain separatist customs,” writes Dvorak, “the word flowed freely in the open air, the Spirit showed no favoritism for either race, and all joined as one in the song festival and marching ceremony that traditionally concluded the gathering” (11).

My point here is not to suggest that revivalism in the South ever fully realized or sustained an egalitarian way of life in the wilderness of the frontier or the pastoral setting of the rural antebellum South; I do, however, want to emphasize that the conditions of these revivals, as controlled as they might have been, allowed for ecstatic experiences of a transformed self which could be contained neither by physical nor social structures were in tension with, if not antagonistic toward, the prevailing social order. The Old South depended on rigid class and racial hierarchies and their accompanying protocols and customs of deference, yet the evangelical religion that came to dominate the region during Reconstruction was rooted in aberrational observances of abandon, of religious disorder, enthusiasm, and excessive demonstrations of personal conversion,

transformation, and ecstasy; this behavior, even when contrived and encouraged by religious organizations in order to convert and ultimately tame the population, defied the conventions of Southern culture at large. The contrast between what the hierarchical structure that the Cane Ridge meeting house reflects and what, for a time, it failed to contain indicates the competing narratives of Southern evangelicalism. In one narrative, evangelical and cultural values in the region have reinforced one another since the beginning; in the seldom-told story of Southern evangelicalism, however, a fundamental tension existed between the two from the outset. Together, these competing narratives tell the story of how the initial threat of religious revivalism in the region was eventually contained through the constant retelling of narratives that conflate Southern religion and Southern culture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> While historians of American religion, such as Boles, Heyrman, Dvorak, Conkin, among others, have characterized the revivals of the early nineteenth century as disruptive or aberrational to extant social and religious orders, others have challenged or qualified this assumption. Don Mathews, for instance, tries to correct the commonplace argument for the social reorientation of Southern religion from resistance to accommodation when he writes that “historians’ righteous indignation at a Christian proslavery argument has prevented a calm, sensible analysis of the slaveholding ethic which was as natural an extension of Evangelicalism as was abolitionism—a conclusion which historians have resisted for years” (*Religion in the Old South* xv-xvi). While Mathews might agree with Heyrman that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of a culturally accommodational evangelicalism in the region, he might also add that neither was the conservative shape it took entirely surprising. Still, Mathews agrees that the “Awakening” of the early nineteenth century, like most religious movements, had as its impetus “conditions of social strain” that “disorient[ed] people,” even though he suggests that the sources of such strains were “often ambiguous, the threat vague and the future uncertain—the anxieties are not focused upon an obvious enemy or an unequivocal situation” (“Second Great Awakening” 32). Similarly, Paul Harvey argues against the cultural captivity thesis, which he summarizes thusly: “Compelled to choose between Christ and culture, Southerners chose culture” (285). For Harvey, this argument undermines the extent to which Southern religious institutions ultimately played an active rather than passive role in establishing and maintaining a racially segregated order. Like Mathews, however, Harvey concedes that, “[o]n occasion,” black and white Southern Christians “shared liminal moments of religious transcendence before moving back into a Jim Crow world where color defined and limited everything” (292). While Mathews’ and Harvey’s corrections or qualifications to any categorical separation of religious and cultural activity in Southern history are necessary, even they must acknowledge moments of social disruption and religious transcendence that precede stabilization and routinization. Some degree of disorder was a prerequisite for the re-ordering of Southern denominations into stabilizing, accommodational movements, and the process of stabilization inevitably entails the systematic exclusion of those characteristics of religious experience that threaten the status quo. For some historians, such fleeting moments of liminality may be too insubstantial to warrant serious attention, but in terms of cultural narrativity, these glimpses of a Southern religious character that defies the master narrative of the conservative Bible Belt are crucial to understanding how the

Revivalism and Southern culture are often conflated rather than seen as being at odds with one another. It is, after all, the Bible Belt: the place where religion and culture “naturally” coincide in grotesque contradistinction to secular nationalism. As Heyrman writes, “So long has this region been regarded as the cultural hearth of evangelicalism in the present-day United States, that it takes some doing to imagine a past that was radically different, a time when a diverse, contentious spiritual culture seemed unlikely to ever become the ‘Bible Belt,’ let alone its proudly proclaimed ‘buckle.’” And in demonstrating this unfamiliar past, Heyrman’s work seeks to uncover a forgotten world of “odd” and “subversive” evangelicals (221). This past is hidden by the type of regional narratives that Wendell Berry describes as “false cultural and literary generalizations” imposed upon “false geographical generalizations” (934). The cultural narrative of the Bible Belt, in particular, has given cogency to the presumably “natural” integration of Southern religion and Southern culture, which in turn precludes any distinction between religious and cultural perspectives as two fundamentally separate ways of knowing the world and thereby precludes the possibility of a distinctively Southern religious examination or critique of Southern culture.

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dissemination of innovative cultural narratives of religious stability have helped solidify a Southern religious identity that had no prior existence. Along these lines, Beth Barton Schweiger, whose position roughly aligns with that of Mathews and Harvey on these questions, argues that “[t]hroughout their history, white Southerners have had an uncanny ability to turn their innovation into nostalgia” (55). She cites Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “habitus,” or a “set of deeply learned, even unspoken, dispositions,” to explain how “the Southern evangelical disposition toward nostalgia has borne a peculiar power. It pervades the historical record, persuading scholars to ignore the vast record of Southern Protestant innovation” (34). This emphasis on innovation and invention exposing the fabrication of nostalgia and tradition is central to my claim that the Southern literary imaginary has also been engaged in both the production and undermining of a Southern religious image that has no precedent.

When Mencken coined the phrase “Bible Belt” as a derisive critique of Southern religiosity and ignorance during his coverage of the Scopes trial in the 1920s,<sup>6</sup> he solidified an important *conceptual* geography in the national imaginary. By suggesting that the Bible Belt is, at least in part, an imagined space—a designation that is as much prescriptive as it is descriptive<sup>7</sup>—I want to call into question the sometimes unspoken assumption that the South’s evangelical character has been a stable and constant facet of Southern culture. For some, the Bible Belt signifies a region that has resisted change in the face of modernization or a culture that has stuck to its antebellum religious heritage in the face of secularization, a place where fundamentalism flourished and the forces of industrialism were much slower to take hold. As I have suggested, however, historians have challenged us to see the South’s religious past as being far more ambiguous, indeterminate, and contentious than the familiar conception of a uniformly evangelical South allows.<sup>8</sup>

An important aspect of the work of Faulkner, O’Connor, and Hurston is that it simultaneously reveals and conceals that marooned Southern world. On the surface, these

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<sup>6</sup> In her essay “The Catholic Writer in the Protestant South,” O’Connor mistakenly cites Mencken as coining the phrase in 1919. Mencken’s first use of the phrase appears in a 1926 editorial in *American Mercury* (see first footnote). The Scopes Trial (aka the “Monkey Trial”) that took place in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925 was the pinnacle of a national debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools. Many Southern fundamentalists rallied in opposition to this curriculum.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, all discursive representations that essentialize the South and its religion are likewise complicit in creating the very things they describe. According to George Levine, “Insofar as the descriptive and prescriptive tendencies of language and fiction are separable, the descriptive tends toward disorder, the prescriptive toward order, the one to integrity of detail, the other to coherence of design” (239-240). The first point here is that the descriptive and prescriptive tendencies are *never entirely* separable. The second point is that reality is more random and chaotic than the language we use to describe (and design) it. My dissertation thus tries to make sense of the conceptual “design” of a homogeneous Southern religion that emerges from the “disorder” and “chaos” of revivalism and Reconstruction and to show how the novels at hand offer intermittent glimpses of a more germinal, unformed religious culture that underlies the more over-determined, homogeneous images of the Bible Belt.

<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, critics have argued that fundamentalism is an inherently modern phenomenon. See, for instance, Karen Armstrong, who writes that religious fundamentalisms are “not a conscious archaism, as people often imagine; it is not a throwback to the past,” but an “essentially modern” phenomenon (viii).

authors participate in the re-imagining and rebranding of the South as the nation's repository of "old-time" religion at the same time that the nation at large was becoming more and more secular. Equally, however, they tend to undermine that characterization of the South by illustrating the inherent tension between Southern religion and Southern culture, a tension rooted in evangelical dissidence and subversion. Religion, in their work, plays a dual and contradictory role: it is the glue that binds Southern culture together and maintains a sense of stability and order amid chaos and upheaval; it is also the source of disorder and disruption that, if left unchecked, threatens to tear it apart.

As Conkin suggests, revivals like the one at Cane Ridge initially upset social barriers and hierarchies, which in turn led to strong "opposition to the more fervent revivals." Revivalism, in that sense, can be understood as a form of religious disorder that helped attract converts and strengthen the grip of the religious order while simultaneously posing a threat to the religious order. Like a controlled fire, they needed to be contained. Even more, the very nature of these revivals, in which participants were described as making such strange displays as falling, rolling, jerking, and even barking (Conkin 130), more than merely challenging social conventions of race, gender, and class, disrupted the tenets of civil discourse and decorum at the basic levels of speech and manners. These bizarre manifestations might even be understood as a ritualistic sort of de-civilization, a return to a primitive, indeterminate, and prelapsarian state of being. But this kind of revival experience cannot be sustained very long, and the aftermath of these ecstatic outpourings ultimately requires the imposition of some form of social structure or regulation.

In his history of revivalism in the South, John B. Boles writes tellingly of the disquieting effect of revivals and of religious leaders' ambivalence toward such spontaneous outpourings of emotion when he describes the "strange and uncontrolled exercises [that] continued beyond the time the religious conservatives considered necessary to awaken men to God's efforts" (95). Revivals, while effective at attracting converts, often among the poorer yeoman class rather than the plantocracy, always carried in their disorderly nature a latent threat, not just to the social order, but also to the religious order. Rather than merely "awakening men to God's efforts," if prolonged, revivals could awaken men (and women!) to other dangerous realities. During these revivals, orthodoxy was often relegated to the background while the emotional experience of conversion became more prominent. "Whenever orthodoxy was relaxed, ever so slightly," writes Boles, "modification was inevitable. Paradoxically, unity and schism were the two results of the revival" (137). In particular, Presbyterianism was especially proactive in terms of containing the threat of revivals to core doctrines, so that the church, in response to uncontrollable outbreaks of ecstatic behavior, tended to grow "more rigid and illiberal" as to "suffer no more losses from what it considered misapplied freedom" (165).

This paradoxical result of revival—of solidification through re-imposed orthodoxy or schism through the establishment of new denominations—finds an interesting analog in Max Weber's early sociological view of religion based on archetypal readings of ancient prophets. Weber's theories can help us understand the processes whereby ecstatic displays initially upset social conventions but, subsequently routinized or institutionalized, resulted in a return to an older order or the establishment

of a new order. The prophet, Weber argues, is often a marginal figure who rises from the laity rather than the priest class: “The priest, in clear contrast [to the prophet], dispenses salvation by virtue of his office. [...] [I]t is the hierarchical office that confers legitimate authority upon the priest as a member of a corporate enterprise of salvation” (47). In the absence of some institutional ordination, Weber argues, other authenticating proofs, including “ecstatic abilities,” helped establish a charismatic prophet’s authority. In the case of Southern evangelicalism, nineteenth century revivals were often self-authenticated by both collective and individualistic displays of “ecstatic abilities” and charisma. In Weber’s model, a “religious community arises in connection with a prophetic movement as a result of routinization” or “the process whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching” and “the economic existence of the enterprise and those who man it” (60-61). In this way, what begins with a disorderly manifestation of “ecstatic abilities” is eventually instituted, through routinization, as a new office. By the same process, what begins as a reformative endeavor loses its radical potential for challenging the status quo as it itself takes on the form of an institution. Anthony Hoefler argues that apocalyptic discourse in Southern literature works in a similar manner. His argument draws heavily upon the work of Malcom Bull, who theorizes that apocalyptic narratives tend to emerge when bivalent categories of difference are threatened by the possibility of “undifferentiation” or the presence of “that which is ambiguous or inspires ambivalence.” In these moments, Hoefler explains, the veil of an “absolutely binary order” is lifted. In some cases, this rupture leads to an apocalyptic rhetoric that condemns and “displaces uncertain presences” in order to “preserve a dominant discourse,” but in other instances, it leads to

an apocalyptic rhetoric that “provides an opportunity to provisionally articulate certain experiences—including suffering, racial hybridity, and transgressions to fixed notions of gender” (12-13). While revivalism need not evoke apocalypse, its suspension of civil conventions likewise creates a possibility of “undifferentiation” that then leads either to a radical restructuring or a reactionary condemnation and displacement.

The basic premise behind Weber’s prophetic model easily applies to the revival phenomenon. Revivalism, in that sense, is necessarily hermeneutical; it breaks down conventional meanings so that new meanings must be stated or old meanings reinstated, which entails either a dramatic restructuring of the social order or an equally dramatic re-imposition of an older order. Of course, something more like the latter has occurred more often than not in the case of Southern evangelicalism. Nevertheless, the seeds of disorder lay always dormant in Southern evangelicalism, even in its more routinized, orthodox form.

## 2. The Margin in the Middle

In colonial North America, evangelicalism was a relatively marginal movement that infiltrated Southern communities. In the South, the Church of England was the established church, but early evangelicals condemned many Anglican Southerners for their leisurely ways—for their drinking, gambling, dancing, and even their mistreatment of slaves. And, whereas post-bellum Southern evangelicalism was largely segregated, leading to the development of distinct black and white denominations of Protestantism, colonial and antebellum revival meetings sometimes temporarily transcended racial boundaries. It was thus by no means inevitable that evangelicalism, represented by a motley group of religious dissenters, most of whom were of “common stock,” would

become the dominant religion of the South. Neither was it inevitable that this contentious and pietistic religion would come to serve the interests of the dominant culture it once condemned. But a number of events, including the Revolution and the resulting decline of the Church of England's influence in the Southern colonies, started the region on this path. It was not until around 1830, according to Samuel S. Hill, that a

left-wing, Low Church, Protestant orthodoxy outdistanced any and all rivals in the race for the allegiance of the people. Prior to this time, several ideological claimants labored in the field, without clear indication that any, much less any particular one, would sweep the masses of people into God's kingdom. In fact, the Southern populace for the great part of the Colonial period was unreligious (not to say, irreligious). Following the first flush of religious incentive during Virginia's infantile years, the colony settled into an essentially commercial existence. (1)

The colonial South was largely a commercial venture, and dissenting evangelicals criticized the established Church of England for its reluctance to chastise Southerners for their nominal Christianity and spiritual complacency. Before the 1830s, from the perspective of marginal evangelicals, the established Church of England—and subsequently the Episcopal Church—was seen as an enabler of religious indifference in Southern culture. Characterizing the relationship between evangelicalism and Anglicanism, Heyrman notes:

Beyond trying to discredit Anglicanism as a religious option, early evangelicals trained their preachers' energies on backcountry districts, where the colonial Church of England was weakest and the greatest number of people were unchurched. Rather than drinking to excess or dallying unto scandal, the besetting

sin of the Anglican clergy was the lackluster vice of sloth, which caused them to neglect the needs of men and women in those remote areas. (9)

The early evangelical ministers of the region, by serving the interests of the socially marginalized, represented a perennial annoyance, if not a significant threat, to the dominant culture. To demonstrate this point, Heyrman chronicles case after case of revivalists being arrested or banned from preaching for disturbing the peace.

This perceived spiritual complacency of Anglicans in the colonial South and the contentiousness of the evangelical newcomers would continue into the post-Revolutionary, antebellum South. Even though the American Revolution officially ended the Church of England's reign in the region, it was reincarnated in Americanized form in 1789 with the establishment of the Episcopal Church. And while Heyrman shows that, statistically, "it never regained anything approaching its former strength," it nevertheless retained its symbolic status as the religion of the planter class as well as its sometimes overwrought reputation for the "lackluster vice of sloth." As Boles explains, the "wealthier upperclass segment was usually Episcopalian if anything" and "this class ridiculed the more pietistic brands of religion" (58). While the evangelical takeover was well underway by the 1850s and 60s, its strongest hold was still largely confined to the common class of Southerners in rural areas.

But even among the commoners, evangelicals still only comprised a minority. Heyrman describes how early Southern whites, not just of the planter class, were wary of evangelicals because of "the view, widely shared by both the humble and the great, that some of these insurgent churches undermined the stability and unity of Southern communities by challenging the hierarchies of class and slavery that properly kept people

apart, while preaching against the customary pleasures that occasionally brought people together” (15). Thus, even in the aftermath of the Revolution that eliminated evangelicalism’s biggest competitor for the soul of the South, evangelical churches were still unable to rise to dominance, increasing their membership in the last decades of the eighteenth century from four to eight percent of the Southern black population and fourteen to seventeen percent of the white population. Even despite a more “muted testimony against slavery,” they could not “command the loyalties of a majority among Southern whites until well into the nineteenth century,” until which time evangelicalism remained, in the eyes of many of the Southern laity, “on the radical fringe, along with such other despised groups as the Quakers and Shakers, [rather] than in the respectable mainstream of Protestant Christianity” (24-27).

The reasons for the general population’s wariness of evangelicals went far beyond the issues of slavery or moral complacency. “[W]hat held the center of lay concern,” Heyrman writes, was the fact that evangelicals “struck at those hierarchies that lent stability to their daily lives: the deference of youth to age; the submission of children to parents and women to men; the loyalties of individuals to family and kin above any other group; and the rule of reserve over emotion within each person” (26). For a modern reader familiar with the characteristics of Bible Belt evangelicalism, some of these subversive tendencies might seem surprising. That evangelicalism, before it was regarded as “old-time” religion, was in many ways a youth movement, for instance, is often overlooked. In fact, Roger Payne has challenged some of the common wisdom regarding the Great Awakening. Historians tend to agree that evangelicalism appealed to ordinary folk because it “offered a compelling model of society that codified their cultural

situation into a new and more meaningful system of religious symbolism” (681). And while Payne corroborates this interpretation, he also argues that an overemphasis on the evangelical Awakening as a response to the religious and governmental failures of the Church of England to meet the needs of the common people in the area can preclude our understanding of the inter-class dimensions of the movement among younger generations. He demonstrates that there was some early support of the evangelical denominations from the gentry class and cites several cases in which the younger sons of successful planters came to endorse the poorer religious dissenters. One reason for this support was that the diminished inheritance of the younger sons of the gentry sometimes included land that was far removed from the father’s primary estate. This dislocation meant that laws preventing tobacco storehouses and trading routes from being developed in the low country put them at an economic disadvantage. Because laws that had secured their fathers’ monopolies on exported crops encumbered their financial success, endorsing the religious dissenters of the region (many of whom were also yeomen farmers hurt by these restrictions) strengthened their lobby to amend those laws. Sons of the established gentry, therefore, sometimes joined backwoods evangelicals to revolt against the patriarchal culture that had dispossessed and disinherited them, and the evangelical religion of dissent became a viable means of self-determination and rebellion across class lines.<sup>9</sup>

Even in the late antebellum period, however, evangelicalism was still largely the same backcountry affair it had been at the outset of the century, of which earlier time

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<sup>9</sup> While Payne’s particular case study focuses on the Piedmont Valley, his research complicates the simple dichotomy between Anglican landed gentry and evangelical yeoman farmers and suggests that generational conflicts, in some instances, led to unexpected affinities between younger generations and poor white farmers.

Boles writes that the “huge majority of churchgoers were of the common sort, habituated to work and poverty” (170). While evangelicalism can be said to have been the most prominent religion of the South since the 1830s, the majority of Southerners were not regular church attendants. To call the evangelical denominations “dominant,” then, is a relative statement and misleading characterization; they were only dominant among devout Southerners, which was a fraction of the population. Evangelicalism did not truly take over the general population until the 1860s and 70s, according to Hill: “Strange as it may seem [...], the pervasiveness of religion is a comparatively new fact of Southern life. A religious solidarity did not emerge until approximately 1830, and then *only in principle*. Not until the period of Reconstruction did the churches’ near-complete conquest of the population get under way [emphasis added]” (11-12). Religion, he suggests, played a less significant role in colonial and antebellum Southern history than we tend to presume; only after “a century of incubation” did “evangelical and revivalistic Protestantism [establish] itself as the South’s popular religion” (16).

### 3. From the Camp Meetings to the Rebel Camps: Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption

The Civil War and the aftermath of Reconstruction created a vacuum in Southern society that evangelicalism seemed to fill. With the defeat of the Confederate nation, religion became a new means of preserving a front of Southern unity in the face of national assimilation, and this is when evangelicalism came down from the hills and conquered the population. Occupied by the armed forces of the United States government, the Southern states became a region of conflicting allegiances, lost causes, and uncertain futures, and many white Southerners were not yet ready to proclaim a renewed sense of patriotism. If they could not reject the nation politically, however, their

need for self-determination would have to be redirected into less overtly political channels. As Charles Reagan Wilson explains, “A Southern political nation was not to be, and the people of Dixie came to accept that; but the dream of a cohesive Southern people with a separate cultural identity replaced the original longing. [...] Religion,” he adds, “was at the heart of this dream” (*Baptized in Blood* 4). Reflecting a similar notion that religion was the “legitimizing impetus” of sustaining a white Southern cultural identity following the fall of the Confederacy, Hill writes that the conflation of the South’s predominant culture and religion “helped enable Southern values and institutions to survive in the face of internal spiritual contradictions and external political pressures” (*Religion and the Solid South* 36). In other words, Southern religion, according to both Wilson and Hill, is a somewhat incidental vehicle for preserving a Southern pseudo-nationalism in the face of Reconstruction and reunification, so that “Southern churches were culturally captive” and the “culture was a captive to the churches.” Both Southern culture and Southern religion came to depend on one another for their continued existence within the nation. “Readmitted to the Union,” Hill concludes, “the South retained its alien identity” (*Southern Churches in Crisis* 12).

Even prior to Appomattox, however, the realization of imminent defeat initiated desperate turns to religion among Confederate soldiers. Drew Gilpin Faust argues, for instance, that the typical Confederate camp at the beginning of the War looked drastically different than at the end. Early in the war, when there was still hope of victory, the camps were much more inclined to the pastimes that evangelicals would have condemned (horseracing, gambling, drinking). For that reason, the camps themselves became a battleground for the souls of soldiers. “Men donning the Confederate uniform did not at

first demonstrate unusual piety,” writes Faust; “At the outset the devoted found themselves very much on the defensive, for religious leaders felt obliged to combat a wide-spread view that godliness would undermine military effectiveness” (68). The martial setting that Faust describes is thus reminiscent of the colonial scene described by Heyrman, in that the devout soldiers constituted a minority in this new context. According to Pamela Robinson-Durso, Confederate leaders only reluctantly supported a chaplaincy during the War, and they initially saw religion in the military camps as a distraction from military campaigns rather than a strategic tool for maintaining soldiers’ morale. “[T]he Confederate government,” she writes, “made only a half-hearted attempt to provide chaplains for the soldiers. The lack of a specific formulation for the establishment of the office left chaplains uncertain about what their rank was and about what duties they were expected to perform” (763). Chaplains who *were* eventually recognized were not officers but drew the same salary and held the same rank as privates. It was only in the aftermath of defeat that some Southerners sacralized the memory of the Confederate cause. According to Mark Summers, the “‘bottom-up’ approach to evangelism [...] is a sharp contrast from the traditional ‘Lost Cause’ view of the Confederate revival. In the decades following the war, a narrative emerged that the Confederate revival was led from the top down, as the men followed the examples of their pious officers” (5-6).

Further revealing the unreligious character of the Confederacy, Faust examines various religious tracts that were distributed to Confederate soldiers by various church organizations. One such tract reads, “Piety will not make you effeminate or cowardly,” which suggests that the religious devotion in the all-male camps was at first viewed as

womanly. Other tracts suggested that when “men [were] removed from the restraining, ‘softening’ moral influences of womanhood and hearth[, they] easily succumbed to the temptations of camp life” (68). When the War began, then, soldiers and officers alike saw religious devotion as a sign of weakness. By the close of the War, however, revivals had begun to break out in Confederate camps.

The unprecedented assembly of poor Southern white men brought about by the War contributed to the outbreak of revivals in these camps, according to Faust. Whereas most antebellum poor whites lived autonomously in rural settings, war brought these men into close proximity with one another. The Confederate Army’s average recruit was “a rural youth who had every expectation of becoming—if he was not already—an independent landholding farmer,” writes Faust, but the fantasy of social equality was initially shattered by the yeomen’s forced encounter with the “superior” class of Southern elites:

Despite the uneven distribution of wealth and particularly of slaveownership in the pre-war South, the common [white] man ordinarily had no direct experience with political or social oppression, for he lived in a democratic political and social order where decentralization minimized perceptions of sharp stratification between planters and plain folk. The prevalent ideology of republicanism had encouraged rich and poor whites alike to cherish their “independence” and autonomy, emphasizing a sharp contrast between their status and that of enslaved blacks. (73-74)

When these formerly “masterless men” suddenly found themselves at the mercy of Confederate officers, they finally experienced their subordinate station in Southern society. For perhaps the first time, these men felt the tenuousness of their provisional “whiteness,” even suffering “corporal punishment” for acts of insubordination. War thus brought about a heightened sense of class and racial consciousness. Religion, however, became a way to reassert this lost sense of equality between poor white privates and elite

officers. In many ways, religious revivals diverted attention away from class distinctions and helped reinscribe the sense of white supremacy that had been momentarily shaken in the chaos of war. For these men, not all of whom were especially religious going into the War, religion offered an alternative to a critical examination of class structure in the South. Of course, it also offered consolation in the face of death and defeat.

In cultural memory, the notion that the evangelical and Confederate missions were incongruous was often forgotten or eschewed. This process of historical revision resembles the way in which early revivals, like the one at Cane Ridge, were subsequently remembered not as challenging religious authority and the region's cultural taboos but as evidence of God's particular interest in the South. While the revival *experience* carried seeds of a radical egalitarianism, the lasting *legacy* of those revivals has more often reinforced the dominant social order of the South. As Faust explains,

In the Confederate army, as in the South of the postwar years, the protean nature of the evangelical message permitted its adherents to appropriate it to satisfy very different purposes and needs. Revivalism served at once as an idiom of social strife and a context for social unity in an age of unsettling transition; it became a vehicle both for expression and resolution of conflict about fundamental transformations in the Southern social order. (90)

Thus, in the aftermath of war, revivalism was retroactively appropriated as a signifier of cultural unity; in turn, this newly imparted religious significance censored revivalism's occasional contribution to disunity, disorder, and schism.

The need to reclaim revivalism culturally was related to the Reconstruction-Era South's need for social redemption on the national stage. But how could it achieve this without denying its heritage? Any insistence on the virtuousness of the Old South, it would seem, was tantamount to an outright defense of slavery—hardly a viable solution at this stage. The answer, in part, lay in religion. “As the war went against the South,”

writes Daniel W. Stowell, “pious Confederates identified Southern sins as the source of God’s displeasure. After Appomattox, they extended this reasoning to encompass Confederate defeat as well...” With Slavery abolished and the South’s greatest sin “removed,” white Southerners more readily asserted that the South was spiritually superior to the “atheistic North,” whose political control and occupation of the South they equated to slavery (140). In their campaigns to end sanctions imposed by Reconstruction and to declare the restoration of the South complete, many white Southerners took up the term “redeemer,” imparting a religious tone to their program for political restoration. For redeemers, “redemption” entailed “the end of Republican political control” in the South (134). Redemption also carried a two-fold meaning. In his history of Tennessee Redeemers, Stephen Ash describes how “two discrete crusades—one to sanctify white society, the other to redeem it—converged, for the defilement of the community by unregenerate constituents and the oppression of it by despotic outsiders had come to be seen in white eyes as two sides of the same odious coin” (quoted in Stowell 140). In other words, redemption from Southern sins and a valorization of Southern culture, for redeemers, proved to be compatible agendas.

Similarly, Paul Harvey observes that “Southern Redemptionists battled to restore a white supremacist order and claimed, without any apparent consciousness of hypocrisy, that their churches were undefiled by the politics that disgraced Northern and black religious organizations” (90). Since the true church was otherworldly and apolitical, according to the doctrine of spirituality that many Southern Christians of the time believed, religious language was ideally suited for rejecting a material or socio-economic vision of redemption. Thus, a superficial separation of religion and politics led ironically

to a religiously-endorsed politics of (white) regional self-determination, while any religious opposition to lingering social injustices was discredited as areligious and interferential. As Stowell writes, “That white Southerners used a religious term to rally white voters and to describe this political event illustrates the ongoing rhetorical interchange between religion and politics and the creation of a distinctive regional civil religion in the late-nineteenth-century South” (146). Religion, accordingly, played a relatively covert political role throughout Reconstruction by creating the image of a unified Southern front in the face of an uncertain political future. This turn to religion, in the absence of the South’s peculiar institution, contributed to a sense of spiritual unity unprecedented in the Old South. Redemption, in that sense, resulted in “a new birth for the South, rather than a restoration of the status quo antebellum” (146).

Despite claims that Southern white churches were “undefiled by politics” (Harvey 90), the political influence that postbellum evangelicalism had on moral reform, in part, accounts for the reimaging of the South as the Bible Belt. In his effort to explain “how a region considered a missionary field in 1865 became the ‘Bible Belt’ by 1920” (155), Gaines M. Foster argues that white Southerners, following emancipation, became less fearful of federal intervention than they had been when they were defending the institution of slavery. Emancipation, he argues, “ended the region’s need to avoid a precedent that could be used against slavery.” In the absence of slavery, Southerners began to support laws that aimed to govern public behavior—moral laws like prohibition that attempted to control the population. Thus, the notion of a Bible Belt, “if not the precise phrase,” had a “positive connotation” for Northerners who sympathized with the Southern effort to legislate morality. For them, the South, after the War, had earned a

“reputation as a bastion of conservative Protestantism.” For Foster, it was “Southerners’ ardent support for prohibition and other attempts to regulate morality [that] helped create the South’s image as the Bible Belt” (159-160). But many Americans, including the phrase’s coiner, certainly understood the narrowness of this type of limited social engagement. While Foster demonstrates that there was a “social dimension” of postbellum evangelicalism, in that many evangelicals lobbied for moral reform, they “focused their political efforts on and employed government power not against social and economic evils, but against personal sins. They sought to ensure a righteous, not a just, society” (162).

#### 4. The Antisocial Gospel

Although early evangelicalism, by its very nature, appealed largely to unprivileged individuals and groups, evangelicalism in the South is not known for fostering social consciousness among the proselytized. It is indeed perplexing that Southern evangelicalism did not evolve in a way that better served the material interests of its earliest adherents—namely, women, blacks (freed and slave), and poor whites—or that it never nurtured an activist mentality to help ameliorate the socioeconomic disadvantages of the very class of Southerners that found solace in the Church. For that reason, Southern evangelicalism is often interpreted in contrast to more socially engaged religious movements, like the Social Gospel, that gained traction outside of the region. “Social gospel proponents,” George Marsden states about the movement, “explicitly rejected the individualism and laissez-faire economics that had prevailed in the Gilded Age and insisted rather that the government take an active part in alleviating the harshest effects of an unrestrained free enterprise” (29).

Evangelical Protestantism had always been particularly suited for the South because it put the burden of spiritual salvation on the individual and deemphasized religious establishments. It took the spiritual authority away from the ordained clergymen and pedantic theologians and placed it in the laypeople's own hands. An eventual consequence of the nonconformist emphasis on individual experiences of conversion, however, was that the evolving social systems, many built around the institution of slavery, were largely insusceptible to religious examination. Evangelicalism, according to Hill, "simply does not view responsibility toward God or man in the light of a social ethic" (lxvi). Charles Reagan Wilson similarly observes, "A broader understanding that morality may be judged by whether a society's overall institutional structures is alien to the predominant views of Southern religion." Thus, he concludes, "The social gospel tradition has [in the South] been weak" (*Judgment and Grace in Dixie* 9).

The evangelical emphasis on personal rather than corporate salvation, in part, made the churches more vulnerable to what John Leigh Eighmy described as a form of "cultural captivity," leaving churches unable to act upon countercultural religious imperatives. With regard to Southern Baptists in particular, Eighmy writes, "pressure from the social environment usually produced the silence, if not the sanction, of the local churches relative to the basic attitudes of the secular world. Thus, when these churches supported slavery," for instance, "they were confirming on moral grounds a position that their region had already determined on secular grounds. In so doing, the churches forfeited their prophetic role within their culture" (19-20). This inclination toward a passive acceptance of political positions, more than merely persisting in the postbellum

churches, often became a more active defense and endorsement of the Southern way of life.

According to Marsden, moreover, the already present evangelical reluctance to recognize a correspondence between spiritual salvation and social welfare was further compounded by the fact that “[m]any Protestants since the Civil War were losing confidence in social solutions to the world’s problems. One sign of this shift was the increasing popularity of premillennialism, which emphasized that the world would not be improved until Jesus personally came again and set up his kingdom on earth” (22). This removal of social problems from religious jurisdiction, of course, was crucial to the coexistence—or segregation, rather—of religious piety and social injustice and was, thus, a key ingredient in both the preservation and the reconstruction of the Southern white Protestant’s self-righteous image following the South’s defeat, leading to an unprecedented increase in church affiliation and general religious fervor.

As the once-fringe evangelical movement crept to the center of Southern life, it thus adopted the reactionary values of the segregated South, thereby losing some of the radical potential it might have retained for reshaping those values. Because of the individualistic nature of personal salvation in the evangelical tradition, moreover, the evangelical religious community of the South, which by the late nineteenth century had shifted from the margins to the center of Southern culture, enjoyed a degree of immunity from charges of systemic violence and other social iniquities; the evangelical community, in other words, was incapable of the sin that individuals could commit, and if individuals who were associated with an evangelical church or denomination acted in a way deemed inconsistent with the religious values, that individual and his or actions could be

dismissed as “extreme” and non-representative. If this logic, in part, explains the apparent contradiction between Christian virtue and Southern depravity, it also accounts for the difficult-to-articulate nature of the relationship between Southern evangelicalism and the segregated culture in which it thrived. Despite the tradition of religious apologia for slavery that was prominent after the Southern churches succeeded from their northern affiliates on the eve of the Civil War, and despite the lingering Lost Cause rhetoric that could be heard from Southern pulpits for decades after, there was a palpable unease between the two, an unease perhaps grounded in the possibility that revivalism might escape its cultural captivity to reclaim its prophetic role.

Under these circumstances, were Southern artists, in contriving a sense of Southern mystique that obscured the subversive tendencies of early evangelicalism, able to engage religion as an ethical discourse, and, if so, how did they construct fictional worlds that could interrelate spiritual experience and ethical action? Precisely this presumed separation between religion and social ethics, I think, brings their interplay to the forefront in the response of several Southern writers to the evangelical conquest of Southern culture following the Civil War. Grasping how imagined geographies such as the Bible Belt emerged in the national imaginary requires understanding how over-determined representations of a socially disengaged and culturally pliable evangelicalism masked the socially disruptive impulse of the revival experience.

### 5. Southern Religion in Black and White

White and black Southern Protestantism do not integrate easily into a general critical thesis about Southern evangelicalism. Part of the difficulty stems from the fact that the task entails critiquing white evangelicalism as oppressive and complicit in

preserving the South's racial hierarchy. Such a critique portrays black Southern Protestantism as an exception or counterpoint, a more communal alternative to the individualist and solipsist inclinations of white Southern evangelicalism or a more socially and politically engaged alternative to white Southern evangelicalism's supposedly apolitical and spiritualist nature. While these are important distinctions, reductively deemphasizing interracial evangelicalism is problematic. Many Southern writers, for instance, represent the regenerative black church as "pure" and the degenerative white church as corrupt, ignoring how such distinctions actually humanize white Christians by treating them as people in need of redemption while essentializing black Christians as symbols of purity. If Stowe's Uncle Tom perhaps typifies the role that the black Christian character plays in white regeneration, later white writers continued to contrast virtuous black Christianity with flawed white humanity. According to Leigh Anne Duck, there was a trend among American modernists to see African Americans as pure, authentic, and "premodern" (Karl Zender's term). In applying this same tendency to African-American religion, William Faulkner, who was "generally unable to credit the white churches he held culpable of oppression with beneficial spiritual effects, nonetheless associate[d] such prospects with the South's African American churches" (278). Similarly, Ralph Ellison observed that representations of blacks in white fiction often lack "the complex ambiguity of the human"; they are represented either as "a beast or an angel" (25-26).

To be sure, there are discernable distinctions between the black Southern church and the white. According to Marsden, "a striking factor of black Christian consciousness, contrasted with the white evangelical counterparts, is that from their vantage point of

being the poor and the oppressed they heard more clearly the biblical themes of Christian responsibilities to brothers and sisters in need.” Even though both white and black Christians “had in slavery listened to the same preaching, the blacks heard in the gospel different meanings than had their oppressors,” which distinct interpretations became more pronounced after emancipation (46-49). Albert Raboteau similarly describes how slaves adopted Christianity to serve their own needs and to codify their own unique experiences using an appropriated form of Christianity. These differences were so profound, Raboteau argues, that they constituted an “invisible institution” within Southern Christianity even before black Christians formally separated from white congregations. He also suggests that part of this distinctiveness can be traced back to surviving African influences.

Thus, these distinctions predate emancipation. Katherine Dvorak, building upon the work of scholars such as Raboteau, argues that the institution of black denominations and churches after the Civil War was not the result of compulsory segregation but of a reification of the “invisible institution” that was already distinct from its white counterpart: “the so-called invisible institution,” she writes, “had been in some sense political long before blacks gave it visible form” (117). To say that the politicization of the black church was the result of Northern interference, she argues, negates the agency of black Southerners. Still, this separation came not from “a full-blown development” or “plan,” but rather from an “incipient orientation” among black Christians (42). For that reason, many white Christians were perplexed by the sudden exodus of emancipated black congregants from the churches.

Black and white Southern evangelicals, however, also have much in common, and exclusively focusing on divergences obscures the dynamic history of Southern evangelicalism by projecting characteristics of the segregated South onto its colonial and antebellum past. Jeffery P. Moran, among others, have therefore tried to re-emphasize the interrelatedness of black and white religion, not in order to negate the important distinctiveness of the two traditions, but to complicate such overwrought binaries as, for instance, progressive/conservative or political/spiritual. “Despite the African American exodus from white-dominated denominations in the decades after emancipation,” writes Moran, “black and white Southerners shared a common religious heritage marked by revivalism, conservative biblical beliefs, and often a sense of premillennial pessimism about the state of the world” (98). Examining the rise of fundamentalism in the 1920s, which has often been racialized as a white phenomenon, Moran explains that “the premillennial dispensationalism that [historians] have seen as integral to the white fundamentalist worldview was present in the black churches, too; it was the common stance for black and white Christians alike in the pessimistic atmosphere of the post-Civil War South.”<sup>10</sup> He thus concludes:

Despite [...] whispers of support for modernism, many African Americans—probably a majority—accepted as literal truth the words of the Bible and possibly even considered themselves fundamentalists. African Americans adhered to a solidly conservative theology, and ministerial leaders ranged themselves in opposition to the same cultural changes that engaged their white counterparts, including not only the spread of Darwinism but also the Jazz-Age sins of

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<sup>10</sup> Dispensationalism refers to the idea that human history can be divided into several “dispensations,” through which God works out his plan for the salvation of humanity. These dispensations are marked by moments of divine intervention (the Fall, the Flood, the Ascension, etc.). According to “premillennial dispensationalism,” we are living at moment between Christ’s Ascension and his return (the Parousia or “second coming”), when he will bring a thousand years of peace to Earth (a literal reading of Revelation, chapter 20). The postmillennial view holds that Christ’s sacrifice has already brought redemption and that we are already living in the “millennia”; postmillennialists often believe in some form of human perfectibility or that the millennial Kingdom is a figurative representation of gradual human progress. Evangelicals and fundamentalists are usually premillennialists.

drinking, dancing, and petting. In the end, though, conservative African Americans never launched themselves into a broader crusade to purify the churches and society. Any tendencies toward accompanying white Southerners on a journey toward militant fundamentalism faded due to the black church's paradoxical status as the central power within the African American community yet a virtually powerless actor within the white South. (113)

The sense of urgency and militancy that spurred conservative white evangelicals and fundamentalists at the turn of the century to bemoan, with a contrived sense of nostalgia, the South's exaggerated religious heritage and to react to the degeneracy of modernism and its accompanying ideologies of secularism and scientism, stemmed from a sense, if not a reality, of lost cultural influence. But such a sense of loss was less prominent within the black church whose influence in the black community remained mostly intact. Moran also speculates that fundamentalist militancy never developed in black churches because there was never a real threat of modernist infiltration since many black ministers did not have the same access to higher education. He writes, "Modernism thus had made few inroads among the African American clergy of the South, and no significant modernist threat existed in the black churches to galvanize conservative ministers into a fundamentalist reaction" (117).

The same historical tunnel-vision that conceals the conservatism that black and white Southern evangelicalism shared also overshadows a shared heritage of evangelical dissent. Southern revivalism was shaped by black and white Southerners alike and was largely a product of interracial religious experience and exchange. In the turmoil of segregation and Jim Crowism, however, Southern revivalism was sometimes retroactively segregated and racialized. In antebellum revivals, according to Dvorak, "the physical manifestation that accompanied conversion and enthusiastic religious experience in revivalism included fainting, falling, shouting, sighing, weeping, singing, dancing, and

the phenomenon commonly termed ‘the jerks’”; however, “some postwar reports described such religious behavior by blacks as barbaric,” despite the fact that “antebellum reports of such behavior by whites and blacks both—at camp meetings for example—portrayed it as glorious evidence of an outpouring of the Spirit” (7-8). Thus, elements of nonconformity and abnormality that were central to evangelicalism before the War were later attributed only to blacks, just as the activist strands of Southern black religion were described in extra-religious terms.

While differences between black and white forms of Protestantism in the South clearly predate the Civil War, the course of Southern evangelicalism was profoundly altered by this transformative event. A focus on the continuity between antebellum and Southern religion without a consideration of the discontinuities lends itself too easily to a re-writing of Southern religious history that conceals the tense and complex relationship between Southern religion and Southern culture at large. The problem of forgetting this discontinuous past is inherently related to the problem of remembering the past in terms of the present, and these questions that challenge extant narratives of a unified Southern history lay at the heart of my critical readings of key Southern texts in the following chapters.

## Chapter Three

### Blessed Insurgence: The Repression of Religious Dissent in *Light in August*

#### 1. Overview

While a number of well-developed interpretations of *Light in August* explore how Faulkner provocatively conflates the cultural narrative of lynching with the Christological mythos (and soteriological theology) of crucifixion,<sup>11</sup> an overemphasis on generic Christian imagery and biblical typology has ironically hidden how the novel depicts the region's peculiarly evolved religious identity. That the religious tenor of the South has changed over time is a central premise in my reading, for even the best attempts to historicize the novel's implied commentary on Southern religion have focused on a short view of conservative white Southern evangelicalism in the early twentieth century. While the more immediate context is important, a longer history of evangelicalism reveals a marginal movement whose early revivals, at times, disrupted and subverted the rigid social order that many of the same denominations and sects would later come to endorse. Faulkner presents a religious culture at odds with itself; religion, in the novel, is at once a stabilizing and destabilizing force, which paradox illustrates an impulse toward dissent and protest latent in a religion of ostensible cultural consensus. This chapter suggests that Faulkner represents religion as a dynamic, rather than static, facet of Southern culture. The history of the centripetal movement of evangelicalism in the South, which the novel embeds in Reverend Gail Hightower's family history, is ultimately a story of how the

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<sup>11</sup>See: Hlavsa, Virginia V. "The Crucifixion in *Light in August*: Suspending Rules at the Post." *Faulkner and Religion*, edited by Doreen Fowler, 127-139. René Girard's theories of scapegoating and ritual violence have also proven particularly fruitful in re-reading Christmas's "crucifixion." See Eric Sundquist's *Faulkner: The House Divided*, Anthony Hoefer's *Apocalypse South*, and Timothy Caron's *Struggles Over the Word*.

subversive traits of evangelicalism were suppressed or redirected after the Civil War, when the so-called Redeemers increasingly turned to religion in order to defend a Southern way of life at a time when a purely political defense of Southern tradition and values was unviable. Moreover, by converging the story of Hightower with the central story of the racially ambiguous scapegoat, Joe Christmas, Faulkner engages the fact that Southern white evangelicalism, as it became more culturally centralized, became proportionately impotent as a transformative social force; rather than cultivating a Christian tactic of subversion and a Christian ethic that could stem racial violence, Southern evangelicalism's averted vertical gaze accommodated the prevailing racist ideology. *Light in August*, in this way, dramatizes the cultural containment of Southern Protestantism whereby the churches, by the early twentieth century, had become so deeply integrated in the culture that they lost the critical ability to examine Southern culture from the vantage of a sectarian perspective.

*Light in August* consists of three distinct narrative threads that briefly intersect around the time of Joe Christmas's death. The central plot revolves around Christmas, whose narrative line is framed by the interposed stories of Lena Grove and Reverend Gail Hightower. Most of the extant scholarship on the novel naturally focuses on the more prominent Christmas narrative, and a significant amount of work also attends to the Lena Grove story with which the novel begins and ends, but the tenuous connections between these components has puzzled readers and raised questions about the novel's structural integrity. In particular, many critics have viewed the Hightower chapters as enigmatic and tangential to the central plot. Ted Atkinson describes the novel's structure as consisting of "contrapuntal narratives that forge divergent paths in the context of one

narrative terrain, often resulting in an unstable condition” (54). Thus, he sees strategic disruption where others see structural flaws. Donald M. Kartiganer likewise describes the effect of the novel’s seemingly disparate narrative threads as “creat[ing] a quality of incoherent mosaic,” the fragments of which “begin to cohere in a tragic dialogue, a modern form in which design emerges as the voice of a chaos that is signified by and subverts that design” (39). Michael Millgate describes the effect of the novel’s form in similar terms but suggests more pointedly how the form relates to the content: the reader, he writes, is “thrown back upon a recognition of irreducible complexity—a recognition that calls sharply, even luridly, into question that automatic demand of the Jeffersonian community for a rigid categorization of those perceived as socially deviant” (44). The disruptive form, in other words, is in tension with the fictional community’s desperate demand for a sense of stability. According to Martin Kreiswirth, “The novel does not, in fact, project wholeness, but precisely its opposite, positively flaunting its disunity, structural lapses, digressions, asymmetries, and imbalances. Its very narrative form, its overall structure, questions some of the genre’s most cherished conventions: the expectations that the text will contain a single, unified (Aristotelian) plot, identifiable protagonists, and, perhaps most insistently, formal wholeness” (55).

Still, some critics find fault with the novel’s disruptive structure. In a specific example of how the critical focus on Christmas has led to a general disinterest in the significance of the Hightower plot, Eric Sundquist suggests that the novel “fails to bring the story of Christmas even into contact with the stor[ies]” of Burden, Hightower, Byron, and Grove” (74), making it easy for Sundquist ultimately to dismiss the “long, most isolating plunge into the past of Hightower that follows Christmas death” as “offer[ing]

little that is relevant to Christmas's life" (91). Millgate also reads the Hightower sections as being accessory to the more integral narratives of Christmas and Grove. He writes, "it is tempting to think of the Hightower material as constituting a third strand plaited together throughout the text with the Lena Grove and Joe Christmas strands," but "Hightower's role in the novel still seems to be governed by Faulkner's apparent conception of him as a narrative tool, a device for organizing a text that the intended from the first to be of unusual complexity and ambitiousness" (39). In *Faulkner: the Return of the Repressed*, Doreen Fowler acknowledges that the "sequencing" of the Hightower chapter, which "follows hard on the death of Joe Christmas," is, "at best, mysterious, at worst, anticlimactic," but she nonetheless ascribes unifying meaning to it by arguing, in Lacanian terms, that Hightower's narrative, like that of Christmas, "'re-counts' the primal trauma from a different perspective" in a way that "render[s] allegorically the way in which human subjectivity comes into being" (64-5).

Hightower, however, is indispensable to our understanding of the novel as a whole and crucial to understanding the Christmas narrative. Both the content and placement of the Hightower chapter are in line with the novel's persistent examination of Southern religion. In the previous chapter, Joe Christmas is killed in the defrocked minister's (Hightower's) kitchen. Prior to the slaying, Hightower makes a last-minute, haphazard attempt to intervene by offering Christmas's pursuer, Percy Grimm, a weak alibi to exonerate Christmas of murder. Hightower's failed intervention becomes an allegorical image of the Southern churches' failure to intervene in matters of social injustice and systemic violence. But Faulkner, having raised the question, does not offer a simple indictment of religion; instead, he goes back in time, via Hightower's family

history, to show how Southern religion was not always incapable of resistance. The two intersecting stories of Hightower and Christmas integrate two facets of Southern history that often remain disconnected: the rise of evangelicalism as the dominant religion in the region and the concurrent surge in racial violence and terrorism that plagued the region from the Reconstruction Era well into the twentieth century.

As an infant, Joe Christmas was abandoned at a Memphis orphanage on Christmas Eve (hence his name) by his maternal grandfather, Eupheus Hines, or Uncle Doc Hines, as the community refers to him. Hines rejects his grandson because he believes Christmas's father was a black man, even though Hines's daughter, Milly, tries to persuade him that her lover was actually Mexican, presumably less offensive to her fanatically racist father. Unconvinced, Hines shoots Milly's lover in cold blood and allows his daughter to die in childbirth by refusing to allow anyone to help deliver the baby.

Adopted by Simon McEachern, a stern Presbyterian who beats the boy for refusing to memorize his catechism, Christmas eventually runs away, living variously as a white man and a black man in different cities but never comfortably accepting either racial designation. In Jefferson, the fictional town around which the novel is centered, Christmas works at the saw mill and runs a bootlegging operation on the side, along with his partner Lucas Burch, who, having run away from a woman he impregnated, now goes by the alias Joe Brown. Christmas lives in the abandoned slave quarters adjacent to the house where Joanna Burden, the only living decedent of a transplanted "carpetbagger" family, lives alone. The two become secret lovers. When Burden realizes that Christmas will not marry her as she had hoped, she determines to kill Christmas and herself;

however, her pistol misfires and Christmas cuts her throat. Her decapitated body is discovered and pulled from her burning house later the same day.

Brown tells the Sheriff that Christmas had once told him he was black. This “revelation” seals Christmas’s fate. Christmas eludes the search party for several days before turning himself in. After a visit in jail from Mrs. Hines, the maternal grandmother he had never known, he escapes custody. He is tracked down by Percy Grimm, a national guardsman whom the Sheriff has reluctantly deputized and who, ironically, considers it his duty to uphold the law by protecting Christmas from the threat of a lynch mob.

The Christmas narrative briefly intersects with the stories of Hightower and Lena Grove. Grove, an unmarried pregnant woman who has traveled by foot from Alabama to Mississippi in search of her lover Lucas Burch (Joe Brown), is told of a man named Bunch. The naïve Bunch, immediately enamored of Grove, becomes obsessed with protecting her, but Hightower, his friend and confidant, tells him not to get involved. Eventually, Hightower, the only educated man that Bunch knows, delivers Grove’s baby, a boy, in the same former slave cabin where Christmas and Brown, the child’s father, had been living.

Years prior to these events, Reverend Gail Hightower had come directly from the seminary to Jefferson, where his grandfather had lived and died. Hightower is obsessed with his grandfather, a Confederate infantryman who had organized a cavalry of former Confederate soldiers to raid Grant’s storehouses in Jefferson, during which the grandfather was shot and killed, before Hightower was born. Hightower’s sermons reveal in his grandfather’s reckless abandon, offending his new congregation and his neglected wife, whom the congregation discovers has been having an affair. A Memphis newspaper

reports that she killed herself by jumping from the window of a hotel room she was sharing with her lover. The congregation ejects the seemingly unaffected minister Hightower from the church, but he refuses to leave Jefferson and moves to the edge of town.

Bunch takes Mrs. Hines to see Hightower, and they try to convince him to provide Christmas with an alibi, but at first he refuses. When Christmas finds his way to Hightower's house, Christmas crashes into the ex-minister, knocking him down. When Grimm shows up shortly thereafter, Hightower makes a feeble attempt to convince him that Christmas was with him when Burden was killed, to which Grimm responds, "Jesus Christ!...Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?" (464). Grimm then pushes Hightower aside and discovers, kills, and castrates Christmas.

Aside from his delivery of Grove's baby, Hightower does little to help advance the action of novel. Just as Grimm "fl[ings] the old man aside" in his pursuit of Christmas, it is easy for the reader to push him aside in pursuit of understanding Christmas's story. Eric Sundquist, for instance, describes this "long, most isolating plunge into the past of Hightower that follows Christmas death" as "offer[ing] little that is relevant to Christmas's life" (91). I propose, however, that we must work through Hightower's character and story in order to best understand the narrative as a whole, and in reading Christmas through Hightower, a defrocked minister, it becomes clear that the collision between religion and the tense cultural climate of the Jim Crow South, an historical collision figured by Christmas's literal crashing into Hightower at the novel's climax, is a significant concern throughout the novel. If Christmas's death is a meant to

signify the lynching epidemic, then the ex-minister's pathetic intervention seems, rather bluntly, to raise the question of the Southern churches' failure to respond to such injustices. The penultimate chapter unpacks this question by taking a long view of religion in the South via Hightower's family history. By pairing the history of evangelicalism's journey from the margins of Southern culture to its center with the history of racial terrorism and lynching evoked by Joe Christmas' death, Faulkner draws attention not to a consistent flaw in Southern religion but to evangelicalism's perplexing turn from cultural dissidence to compliance. In this light, the Hightower sections of the novel are more structurally integral and less accessory than some critics have allowed.

## 2. The "chapel back in the hills": The Forgotten Legacy of Evangelical Dissent in the Hightower Narrative

The story of Hightower's family spans three generations, and within this narrative thread Faulkner represents distinct stages of Southern Protestantism. Hightower's grandfather represents the first stage characterized by the "high religion" of the colonial South's plantocracy. A lapsed Episcopalian and self-styled Southern cavalier, the grandfather connotes the religious establishment of the Church of England against which the earlier evangelicals were defined as dissenters. The grandfather's son—Hightower's father—provides a stark religious contrast to the grandfather; lay Presbyterian minister prior to the Civil War, Hightower's father would travel every Sunday into the countryside to preach to a rural congregation. He is also a Southern abolitionist. His abolitionist views, which the narrator reports are native and not imported from the North, position him as a religious dissenter whose evangelicalism is at odds with predominant cultural values. Finally, Hightower, like his father, is a Presbyterian minister, but as an

ordained seminarian who preaches at a church in the center of town, he embodies the more culturally centralized evangelicalism of the post-bellum South. Lacking his father's antebellum sense of religious dissidence, Hightower's religion confuses cultural and religious imagery and values. Hightower, by conflating his antithetical grandfather and father, combines the form and structure of his father's antebellum religion with the "victory in defeat" message of his Confederate grandfather, and this, in some ways, makes Hightower a proselytizer of what Charles Reagan Wilson has argued constitutes a distinct civil religion of the Lost Cause: "The [Confederate] nation was never resurrected," Wilson writes, "but it survived as a sacred presence, a holy ghost haunting the spirits and actions of post-Civil War Southerners" (*Baptized in Blood* 1). The contrast between this abolitionist Southern preacher and his preacher son who, decades after the War, is obsessed with the Lost Cause, dramatizes the evangelical shift from cultural outlier to cultural apologist. Thus Faulkner embeds in *Light in August* an impression of a past that Christine Heyrman describes as "a world marooned from living memory in which evangelicals [...] were viewed by most whites as odd at best and subversive at worst" (221).

By focusing only on the ways in which Southern white religion conforms to the dominant culture, readers seldom examine how the novel depicts a centralized regional religion at odds with its own eccentric origins. In my reading, however, the novel provocatively juxtaposes the unfamiliarly dissident tone of early revivalism with a more familiar religion of cultural assent. In the religion of the novel's present, evangelical dissent has been repressed in cultural memory but still threatens to return in various disruptive forms. Thus, religious extremism, even when laden with the trappings of

segregationist ideology, must be contained and controlled within the narrative because it retains the potential of earlier revivalism for destabilizing social norms.

My reason for reading Faulkner's Presbyterians as representing a broader evangelical movement, however, warrants a brief explanation. The Presbyterian Church never achieved the same ubiquity in the South as the other two major evangelical denominations, Baptist and Methodist. In addition the Presbyterian Church has traditionally been more theologically conservative and anti-revival and has, thus, appealed less to lower class Southerners. In that light, the idea that Faulkner would use Presbyterians synecdochally to depict the rise of evangelicalism in the region may seem curious. But no denomination better represents the cycle of disruption and order in Southern evangelicalism. One of the most famous revivals of the early nineteenth century was the Cane Ridge revival in Kentucky, which began at a small Presbyterian meeting house. The interdenominational enthusiasm of the revival pushed the limits of the Kentucky Synod, and the church's leader, Barton W. Stone, eventually broke with the Presbyterian Church. Such "New Lights" movements,<sup>12</sup> led by defecting Presbyterians, eventually led to the establishment of new evangelical denominations like the Disciples of Christ. Thus, the Presbyterian Church epitomizes the cycle of destabilization and stabilization in Southern evangelicalism. But even for Presbyterians, orthodoxy was temporarily relegated to the background during revivals, while the emotional experience of conversion became more prominent. "Whenever orthodoxy was relaxed, ever so slightly," writes John B. Boles, "modification was inevitable. Paradoxically, unity and schism were the two results of the revival" (137). The Presbyterian Church was

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the New Lights movements in the Piedmont Valley, see Rodger Payne's "New Light in Hanover County: Evangelical Dissent in Piedmont, Virginia" (discussed above on page 20).

especially proactive in terms of regulating the threat of revivals to core doctrines through what might be called a “controlled burn.” The church, in response to uncontrollable outbreaks of ecstatic behavior, tended to grow “more rigid and illiberal” as to “suffer no more losses from what it considered misapplied freedom” (165). Nevertheless, Presbyterianism, like the other denominations, could not have taken root in the South without its appeal to the common Southerner, the yeoman farmers, women, free blacks, and slaves. Its reluctance to compromise doctrinal integrity for ecumenical growth, however, created a less permeable border between clergy and lay believers than that of other denominations, in which the laity had a more significant influence on religious praxis and doctrine. As a “borderline” evangelical denomination, then, Presbyterianism only heightens questions of the subsequent containment of revivalism. As Robert L. Johnson observes, “The Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *born of the revival fires* out of Kentucky in the mid-nineteenth century, was a red-bricked architectural favorite of Faulkner's [emphasis added]” (68-69). However marginally evangelical the Presbyterian Church may now seem, and however much its numbers pale in comparison to Methodist and Baptist membership, its impact on Southern revivalism was disproportionately large and its role disproportionately central. Finally, both Baptists and Presbyterians grew out of Calvinism, but the latter retains a stronger theological connection to Calvinist principles. For that reason, much commentary on Faulkner’s particular preoccupation with Presbyterians focuses on predestination. This doctrine parallels veins of cultural fatalism in Faulkner’s fiction—the way Joe Christmas’s tragic fate, for instance, seems predestined to follow the script of the black fugitive lynching narrative. By also acknowledging the strands of the Southern Presbyterian Church “born of the revival

fires,” however, this chapter reveals a latent tension between a religion of predestination that conforms to conventions and a religion of revival that violates them.

Rather than retrospectively positioning Southern evangelicalism as a constant and stable core of Southern culture, the generational conflicts in the Hightower family narrative allegorize the historical transformation of Southern Protestantism. Over the course of three generations, Faulkner concisely captures the transfiguration of the subversive spirit of early evangelicalism into an evangelicalism that reinforces Southern cultural values rather than defying them. Thus, in addition to offering a critique of the church's failure to intervene, the novel offers a critique of the type of cultural narratives that depict a Southern religion as homogenous and constant. These widely-circulated narratives of the “Old Time Religion” often obscure those facets of the religion’s history that might seem unfamiliar. Too often the Bible Belt is understood as a deeply reactionary region where religion inhibits progress, but when read alongside the underlying history of the centralization of Southern evangelicalism, *Light in August* surprisingly suggests that religion itself can be overdetermined, limited, and diverted by these popular cultural narratives that have overwritten the marooned world of subversive evangelicalism.

Implicit in the Hightower backstory is a historical narrative in which the threat of early rural evangelical revivals to the prevailing social order was ultimately contained through cultural regulation and assimilation. Years prior to the action of the narrative, Hightower had come to Jefferson, along with his wife, straight out of a Presbyterian seminary. In the pulpit of his new church, Hightower indulges in his irrational obsession with his grandfather, about whom he publically pontificates and romanticizes as a

chivalrous Confederate hero. It is this obsession which initially brought him to Jefferson, where his grandfather was killed before Hightower was born. All of Hightower's sermons revolve around the telling of his grandfather's gallantry, which indecorous ramblings his Presbyterian congregation only reluctantly tolerates. Hightower is eventually defrocked, however, when his wife kills herself by jumping out of a hotel window where she had been staying with another man. Despite being pressured to move, Hightower refuses to leave Jefferson, moving instead to a house on the outskirts of town, where over time he is more or less forgotten by the community. Of this residency, one anonymous member of the community says, "He has lived out there on *what used to be the main street* ever since, by himself" (my emphasis 59). The former center of the community has become the margin to a new center, and this shift corresponds in a significant way to Hightower's expulsion from the parsonage near his former church in the center of town to his new residence in a now liminal space. This literal decentering of the preacher presents a degree of cognizance on Faulkner's part of the cultural integration of a religion first cultivated in the margins of Southern society; at the same time, the continued expulsion of religious eccentrics and eccentricities to the social fringe suggests a persistent policing of incorporated evangelicalism. From his initial arrival at the Jefferson train station to his eventual exile to a "dark house" on the edge of town, Hightower's movements to and away from the center of Jefferson literalize both the centripetal and centrifugal movement of evangelicalism in Southern culture.

Hightower, we quickly learn, lives in the past—not his own past, but the past of his grandfather and his father. His grandfather is a former Confederate soldier and his father a preacher-turned-doctor. Hightower tries to fill all of these roles simultaneously:

being a minister as his father was before and during the war, practicing medicine as his father did after the war (Hightower, having once failed in his attempt to deliver a black woman's baby, successfully delivers Lena Grove's baby at the end of the novel), and, of course, recounting his grandfather's story every chance he gets, even in the pulpit.

Indeed, the narrator consistently describes Hightower as being haunted by the ghosts of his ancestors: when he sits in his window and can hear the ghostly hoofs of the cavalry in the distance; when he is described as having grown "to manhood among phantoms" (476). The community of Jefferson also reflects Hightower's hybridization of culture and religion when, not knowing that the "D.D." written next to Hightower's name stands for Doctor of Divinity, they interpret it to mean "Done Damned" both in jest of his reputation as communal pariah and in reference to his manic obsession with his dead grandfather. Together, the reinterpreted designation suggests a backward-looking divinity of damnation rather than a forward-looking divinity of redemption.

To understand how Hightower embodies the strange conflation of evangelicalism and Lost Cause ideology we need to examine the two strands discretely, as reflected in Hightower's father and grandfather. These figures, whom Hightower has internalized, are often at odds with one another. While his father "was an abolitionist almost before the sentiment had become a word to percolate down from the North" (472), his grandfather was a slave-owner and "the single thorn in the son's side" (470). This common phrase clearly alludes to Paul's puzzling "thorn" mentioned in I Corinthians 12:7: "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated" *NRSV*. The father, then, can be understood not just as being a thorn in the son's side because he represents certain values

that the son abhors; the father is also a reminder to the son of where he comes from lest he become “too elated” or self-righteous. The thorn is a reminder that his voluntary religious identity—his *second* nature—must be kept consciously discrete from his inherited cultural identity. When religion becomes unconsciously naturalized as part of one’s inherited identity, this reading suggests, it loses its “thorniness” or its critical view of the status quo.

The grandfather, however, is even more troubled by his son’s religion than by his proto-abolitionist principles:

For a year he had been leaving home early each Sunday morning before his father...who though a member in good standing of the Episcopal church had not entered any church since the son could remember, discovered where he went. He found that the son, then just turned twentyone, was riding sixteen miles each Sunday to preach in a small Presbyterian chapel in the hills. The father laughed. The son listened to the laughter as he would if it had been shouts or curses: with a cold and respectful detachment, saying nothing. The next Sunday he went back to his congregation. (467-68)

This short passage concisely reflects the marooned history of dissenting evangelicalism.

As “a member in good standing of the Episcopal church,” the father is more representative of the dominant colonial Southern culture and the antebellum planter class than the son. That his “good standing” is not undercut by the fact that he does not attend church reinforces the presumed complacency of Southern Anglicanism and the ostensibly symbiotic relationship between token-Anglicanism and the Southern aristocracy.

Reminiscent of the Anglican vices of leisure deplored by early evangelicals, the Episcopalian father’s habits include drinking, gambling, and owning slaves, while the Presbyterian son is a dogmatic believer in temperance and abolition, venturing far into the hills to minister to the very “backcountry” and “unchurched” folk that Cleanth Brooks

describes as poor whites “pushed off the fertile land and back onto the pine barrens or onto the sterile hills” (10).

While father-son rivalry is a recurring theme in the Faulkner canon, rarely does religious dissent play such a prominent role in these conflicts. For that reason, the relationship between Hightower’s Episcopal grandfather and evangelical father reflects a more nuanced history of Southern evangelicalism often obscured by the idea that evangelical religion was a more or less stable and ubiquitous facet of Southern culture. The novel thus casts the Civil War as a significantly transformative moment in Southern religious history, after which Hightower’s father abandons his religious mission and Hightower later becomes an antithetical minister, presenting a new Southern evangelicalism that is almost unrecognizable when compared to his father’s antebellum religion.

Both Hightower’s father and grandfather would become Confederate veterans, although their roles in the war remain disparate. After the war began, we are told, the son “stayed with the troops for four years, though he fired no musket and wore instead of uniform the somber frock coat which he had purchased to be married in and which he had used to preach in” (468). He is described as a volunteer Confederate chaplain. According to Pamela Robinson-Durso, Confederate leaders only reluctantly supported a chaplaincy during the War and only made “a half-hearted attempt to provide chaplains for the soldiers” (763). Thus, many chaplains who served in Confederate camps were civilian volunteers, and the chaplains who *were* recognized only held the rank of a private. Accordingly, they had no distinct uniform, so Hightower’s father’s “somber frock,”

which was originally meant to be a wedding suit, becomes a metaphor for the uneasy and unforeseen marriage between the Southern churches and the Confederate cause.

When the minister returns from war and gets married, Gail Hightower, the conflicted conflation of evangelical and Lost Cause ideologies, is born. The narrator explains that Hightower, as a child, would sneak into the attic just to look at his father's frock:

The garment was almost unrecognizable with patches. Patches of leather, mensewn and crude, patches of Confederate grey weathered leafbrown now, and one that stopped his very heart: it was blue, dark blue; the blue of the United States. Looking at this patch, at the mute and anonymous cloth, the boy, the child born into the autumn of his mother's and father's lives, . . . would experience a kind of hushed and triumphant terror which left him a little sick. (469)

Hightower, as a boy, singles out the blue patch because he is thrilled by the possibility that his father might have killed a Union soldier, which would imbue in the stoic father some vital essence of the idolized grandfather that Hightower never met. In his old age, however, Hightower knows that this could not be true. Thus, the young boy, obsessed with the chivalry of the Lost Cause, is blinded to the implications of the patched-up frock, a garment that brings together religion and state, Union and Confederacy, as well as heteronormative romance and the masculine camaraderie of war (the wedding frock being "mensewn and crude"). In the chaos of war, these dichotomies, which we might expect would be heightened, become confused and merged. But in the remembrance and memorialization of wartime glory, those differences are re-imposed and made all the more distinct, so that that Union patch is vividly perceived as being "dark blue" yet at the same time "mute and anonymous." As W. Fitzhugh Brungdage writes, "Expressions of historical memory require precise articulation. Culturally influential historical narratives typically acquire an accepted form that is free of the idiosyncrasies and nuances that

shade personal memory” (9). Hightower nostalgically preserves a cultural memory of a historical moment he never witnessed or experienced, and the form of that memory is more “precise,” more “vivid,” because it is rooted in social identity rather than personal experience.

The cultural memory of war as a clear-cut narrative of opposing values obfuscates the ambiguities implicit in the image of the patched-up frock that was part wedding coat, part chaplain frock, and part military uniform (both Union and Confederate). Through this image and through Hightower’s story, the experience of revival and war intermingle, confusing distinctions between the Confederate Cause and the Christian mission, between the military camp and the camp meeting. As Drew Gilpin Faust’s examination of the revivals that occurred in Confederate camps toward the end of the War suggests, there were conflicting impulses within the Southern evangelical tradition before the War that were overshadowed by the reconstructed memory of a more solidified regional identity that emerged during the War, with certain interpretations of the region’s evangelical heritage winning out over others. Hightower’s contradictory remembrance of the Union patch on his father’s marital/martial frock as being both vivid and muted speaks to this notion of cultural memory as moving paradoxically from ambivalence to certitude and clarity. Just as importantly, it places Southern religion at the crux of this transition and invites the reader to reflect upon the Civil War as a type of catalyst for the transformation of Southern evangelicalism into the conservative white Southern evangelicalism that came to dominance in the postbellum South. As Samuel S. Hill notes, “the pervasiveness of religion is a comparatively new fact of Southern life. [...] Not until the period of

Reconstruction did the churches' near-complete conquest of the population get under way" (*Churches in Crisis* 11-12).

According to Faust, "Men donning the Confederate uniform did not at first demonstrate unusual piety." Those soldiers who were devout thus "found themselves very much on the defensive, for religious leaders felt obliged to combat a wide-spread view that godliness would undermine military effectiveness" (68). If religion were going to have a positive influence on soldiers, it would have to be reinscribed in more masculine terms. This masculinization of religion is reflected in Hightower's grandfather's view of his son during and after the war: He "returned a changed man, 'deodorised,' as his dead father would have put it, of sanctity somewhat" (473). In the father's view (though still a matter of Hightower's conjecture), the experience of war, rather than defiling his son's idealism, "deodorise[s]" him of "sanctity." Of course, sanctity typically denotes purity, but the father reconfigures purity here as the very contaminant in need of purgation. In his cavalier view, the son's exposure to war and violence becomes a rite of passage from naive innocence to the manhood of experience. If, in the grandfather's perspective, exposure to war brought his evangelical son into a heretofore lacking connection with the cavalier world of men, then we might infer, allegorically, an analogous transformation of evangelicalism from the margins to the respectable and paternalistic center, a shift made possible by the chaos of war. Violence in *Light in August* is often read in Girardian terms of ritual sacrifices that preserve purity and purge contamination (see note 1). Here, however, it is not purity but violence itself—as a rejection of sanctity—that self-perpetually necessitates violence. The violence of the Civil War, in the terms of Hightower's narrative, is decidedly unsanctimonious. Only in

the post-Civil War context is violence re-presented in terms of redemption, at the same time that the South becomes overtly religious.

Ultimately, the son and father follow reverse paths after the war. The son, who had spent time in the rural countryside as a minister before the war, gets married and moves into the family house in the center of town, while the father removes to the country. The son and his new wife

would hear of his (Hightower's grandfather's) doings [...], of how in the next summer after he removed to the country he invaded a protracted al fresco church revival being held in a nearby grove and turned it into a week of amateur horse racing while to a dwindling congregation gaunt, fanaticfaced country preachers thundered anathema from the rustic pulpit at his oblivious and unregenerate head. (472)<sup>13</sup>

While I have here been assuming that Hightower's grandfather is representative of the dominant planter class (he is a former slave-owner, a member of the Episcopal Church, a lawyer, and a ridiculer of evangelicalism), the narrative hints that he is only a self-styled Southern gentleman, or that Hightower exaggerates his status: he is a self-taught lawyer, he only owns two slaves, and he is not a ranking officer in the Confederate Army, as we're told that he carried no sword and wore a private's uniform. Most telling, he is killed stealing chickens from a henhouse, probably by the wife of a Confederate soldier, during a poorly organized raid on Grant's storehouses in occupied Jefferson after the war is over. These details challenge his aristocratic pretenses. Thus, his aversion to rural evangelicals may stem from his own suppressed sense of social insecurity. Clearly the

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<sup>13</sup> Yet another example of how Faulkner was concerned with the particularities of Southern evangelical cultures is the detail of the "protracted al fresco church revival," which alludes to a common type of impromptu religious edifice also known as a "brush arbor." Brush arbors were erected when revivals broke out in rural areas where no permanent church structure existed. To my knowledge, no in-depth study has been done on brush arbors, but Dennis Covington includes an informative passage about this practice in his book *Salvation on Sand Mountain*.

antagonism between the grandfather's cavalier notions and the religious enthusiasm he mocks persists after the war, only the grandfather now inhabits the same rural margins as the "fanaticfaced preachers" he ridicules. The grandfather tries to syphon off attendants of revival meetings and recreate another type of camp meeting—the overly masculine Confederate camp meetings that preachers at the beginning of the War had warned were hotbeds of iniquitous activities.

The son, on the other hand, has become more centralized but also less religious. As Hightower reflects, "The very fact that he (the son) could and did see no paradox in the fact that he took an active part in a partisan war and on the very side whose principles opposed his own, was proof enough that he was two separate and complete people, one of whom dwelled by serene rules in a world where reality did not exist" (473). The experience of war, while not blatantly altering the son's core principles, represents a clear separation between a spiritual and civil life, whereby those principles, or "serene rules," are consigned to a transcendent "world where reality d[oes] not exist" and thereafter have little bearing on the reality that *does* exist. This division, in fact, works in the son's favor: "And when the war was lost and the other men returned home with their eyes stubbornly reverted toward what they refused to believe was dead, he looked forward and made what he could of defeat by making practical use of that which he had learned in it. He turned doctor." The same passage continues:

[Hightower's] father who had been a minister without a church and a soldier without an enemy, and who in defeat had combined the two and become a doctor, a surgeon. It was as though the very cold and uncompromising conviction which propped him upright, as it were, between puritan and cavalier, had become not defeated and not discouraged, but wiser. As though it had seen in the smoke of cannon as in a vision that the laying on of hands meant literally that. As if he came suddenly to believe that Christ had meant that him whose spirit alone required healing, was not worth the having, the saving. (474-5)

The son's burden for saving souls becomes, after the war, a career of saving and prolonging lives. That is not to say, however, that his religion has translated into a secular vision of social responsibility for others' wellbeing. His medical practice, as far as we are told, is not as explicitly altruistic as the reader is led to believe were his ministerial endeavors. He does not venture into the hills to tend to the *physical* needs of the marginalized in the same way that he had ministered to them as a preacher before the war. The fact that Hightower now lives on an inheritance left him by his father, moreover, suggests that he was financially successful as a physician. To understand how this character's wartime transformation reflects the transformation of Southern evangelicalism, therefore, we have to consider how the father's professional future as a doctor is separate from his evangelical past, which is now only a spiritualized abstraction, and how this divided self is indicative of the New South and the religion that prospered throughout the South in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Hightower's father is held upright, as the narrator puts it, between "puritan and cavalier," which explicitly alludes to the New South rhetoric of Southern orators like Henry Grady, who in his famous speech, "The New South," memorialized President Lincoln as combining the virtues of the northern Puritan and the Southern cavalier. Lincoln, he announced, "was the sum of Puritan and Cavalier, for in his ardent nature were fused the virtues of both, and in the depths of his great soul the faults of both were lost" (11). The purpose of Grady's New South campaign was to encourage Southerners to look forward to a brighter future in which an industrialized South would be reintegrated into the Union without losing a sense of cultural distinction and pride and to ensure that the South would play a prominent role in the future of the nation and would not simply be

assimilated into the North. Hightower's father, the former preacher who had opportunistically taken the skills he learned on the battlefield and become a successful surgeon, is in some ways an allusion to Grady's New South ideal, a Southern professional of a new business class forged in the Civil War but looking forward to a new future.

But the New South vision never comes to fruition, and thus Hightower, who idolizes his Old South grandfather, remembers his New South father not as a virtuous conflation of puritan and cavalier but as a ghost, held upright *in-between* them—as if those two ideals, rather than complementing one another in a new breed of Southerner, negated one another, leaving only the apparition that Hightower remembers. Rather than fusing the virtues of cavalier and puritan while abandoning their faults, as Grady says of Lincoln, Hightower's father, in the eyes of Hightower at least, represents the fleeting vision of an economically redeemed South. The story of his father's professional success is not the story of the success of a triumphant New South, but is rather the story of its failure. Thus, his father uses his medical skills to prolong unnaturally his wife's life, just long enough so that Hightower could be born in the "autumn" of his parents' lives. Significantly, Hightower is described by his former congregants as being either infertile or impotent. They report to Byron Bunch that "he made his wife go bad and commit suicide because he was not a natural husband" and they insinuate that he was unable to satisfy her sexually (71). Hightower becomes an impotent figure of miscegenation, but rather than being the product of *racial* miscegenation, often symbolized in the literature of the time by the racially charged image of the infertile mule, he is the infertile offspring of the cavalier and the puritan, the antitype to Grady's Lincoln whose hybridity denotes virility and strength.

Hightower's own pathetic business ventures further dramatize the perceived failure of the New South project. When Hightower is removed from his post at the church and encouraged to move away, he refuses. He is subsequently terrorized and beaten by the K.K.K., which masked cavalry represents an ironic parallel to the revered and nearly worshiped cavalry of his grandfather who had gathered a voluntary militia of ex-Confederates to raid Grant's storehouses in Jefferson. But even after being beaten, Hightower refuses to leave town. His former congregation even takes up a collection to help with his moving expenses. When they learn that he has instead bought a house on the outskirts of town, they assume he has done so with their donation, but when they confront him, he returns the entire sum down to the last cent. Thus, the reader comes to understand Hightower in economic terms. He is able to afford the house because of a trust inherited from his father, but without his salary from the church, he must attempt to supplement his income. Toward that end, he erects a sign in the front of his house that reads:

REV. GAIL HIGHTOWER, D.D.  
Art Lessons  
Handpainted Xmas & Anniversary Cards  
Photographs Developed (58)

In the narrative's present, however, the meticulously crafted sign has faded and the glittering broken glass "contrived cunningly into the paint" has "weathered out of the fading letters." Hightower is unable to imitate his father's post-evangelical, entrepreneurial example. He is unable to use his various skills to achieve commercial success, and his effort comes across as laughable. His failure is foremost represented as a personal failure—his business failing primarily because he resides on a "remote and unpaved and littleused street" where he has been sentenced due to his failure as a minister

and husband (59). He also lacks the Puritan work ethic of his father. The narrator describes him as being a lazy man with a “flabby paunch” who spends his days sitting in the same chair reading books in his personal library (403). In one scene, Byron, looking for Hightower, enters his “enclosed back yard” where he finds a

canvas deck chair, mended and faded and sagged so long to the shape of Hightower’s body that even when empty it seems to hold still in ghostly embrace the owner’s obese shapelessness; approaching, Byron thinks how the mute chair evocative of disuse and supineness and shabby remoteness from the world, is somehow the symbol and the being too of the man himself. (362)

The chair, in Byron’s view, evokes “disuse,” which is an interesting observation to make following a description of the chair’s apparent overuse. Hightower is so immobile and stationary that he is almost indistinguishable from the chair that has, paradoxically, taken the shape of his shapelessness. As a personification of sloth and idleness, Hightower represents a grotesque inversion of his entrepreneurial father; incapable of self-determination, he remains formless and indeterminate. Indeed, one clear difference between his unsuccessful venture and his father’s relatively successful practice is its esoteric and impractical nature, focusing on art and photography and ornate holiday cards. The difference, however, lay not solely in Hightower’s moral or commercial shortcomings, but also in the disparate socioeconomic contexts—his own efforts falling flat in the midst of the Depression and at a time when the New South promise of prosperity seemed lost.

If the turbulent and transitional period from Reconstruction to the early twentieth century is the moment when evangelicalism rose to cultural dominance—at the peak of its fertility—why does Faulkner create an evangelical preacher who is impotent—socially, economically, and possibly sexually as well—and who exists on the margins,

rather than at the center, of the Southern community? In a telling passage early in the novel, a member of Hightower's former congregation talks to Byron Burch about

Hightower's uncouth antics in the pulpit:

they told Byron how the young minister was still excited after six months, still talking about the Civil War and his grandfather, a cavalryman, who was killed, and about General Grant's stores burning in Jefferson until it did not make sense at all. They told Byron how he seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream. Not a nightmare, but something which went faster than the words in the Book; a sort of cyclone that did not even need to touch the actual earth. And the old men and women did not like that, either. (61-62)

The perspective represented by Hightower's congregation could easily confound a reader who expects to find in Southern churches a comfortable acceptance of Lost Cause rhetoric. Instead, the passage suggests an acute sense of discomfort at the spectacle of a minister reveling in the glory of the Civil War in the pulpit. Even the "old men and women did not like" Hightower's ramblings, a caveat emphasizing how the older generation, whom we might expect would sanction the sacralization of Southern history, are put off by Hightower's "wild" sermons. His infusing of Civil War stories into his sermons, we are told, "did not make sense at all," which suggests that secular Southern history is rendered unintelligible in this religious context—that it somehow subverts the congregation's expectations of an apolitical religious experience. The notion that Hightower is "wild," moreover, implies that his sense of history has yet to be domesticated or tamed. He uses "religion as though it were a dream." The relationship of Southern religion to Southern history in the novel, at least in the context of safe Protestant spaces like Hightower's former church, is often presented in clandestine terms. If we understand dreams as functions of the unconscious, as unintelligible narratives that both invite and resist interpretation, the congregation's complaint to Byron becomes an

accusation against Hightower of bringing the unconscious into the realm of consciousness, of trying to “use religion” to sublimate what ought to remain hidden, and this, I propose, is the real source of their discomfort. That Hightower’s sermons move “faster than the words on the Book” suggests that Hightower’s message is not anchored in scripture, like “a cyclone that did not need to even touch the earth.” In a plain sense, the congregation sees Hightower’s sermons as being out of touch with true religion, but latent in their unease is the suggestion that what is truly unsettling, despite the visible gap between the cyclone and the earth, is that an invisible force still connects Hightower’s fatalism to their own innocuous religion of escape.

The nascent connection between the Lost Cause and religion creates a clear sense of collective anxiety, as exemplified here by the congregation’s outspoken disapproval of Hightower’s unfit sermons. Still, the congregation, while uncomfortable with their pastor’s unintelligible ranting, does nothing to address the situation and begrudgingly tolerates Hightower’s sermons as dismissible aberrations. Not until Hightower is ensnared in the scandal of his wife’s infidelity and suicide does the congregation take action, staging public walkouts that end in his removal from the church. What accounts for their apparent inability or unwillingness to act on their disapproval of his wild sermons and the converse decisiveness with which they respond to his personal shortcomings? Once again, the context of the shift from marginal antebellum Southern evangelicalism to post-bellum evangelical dominance in Southern culture offers clarity. For white Southern evangelicals specifically, social ethics never became a test of their Christian faith. As a result, a narrowly conceived notion of personal piety was magnified while broader questions of social justice were minimized. In this light, it makes sense that

Hightower's congregation is quite willing to protest when they discover that his wife has been having an affair, but for whom the thinly veiled racial politics inherent in Hightower's Lost Cause theology seem always to lie beyond their religious jurisdiction. Sexual impropriety is figured, in this logic, as a question of personal morality and is thus subject to religious scrutiny, while the legacy of slavery in the shape of Jim Crow laws and extrajudicial forms of racial terrorism is pushed beyond the reach of the Church.

The *tacit* nature of their religious resignation to racist ideology becomes clear in the church's and the K.K.K.'s good-cop-bad-cop treatment of the disgraced minister. The congregation takes up an offering to help Hightower move out of town, presumably for his own protection. When Hightower refuses, he receives a threat signed by the Klan. Hightower again refuses and is later found in the woods "tied to a tree and beaten unconscious": "He refused to tell who had done it. The town knew that was wrong, and some of the men came to him and tried again to persuade him to leave Jefferson, for his own good, telling him that next time they might kill him" (72). The ambiguous antecedent of the "they" who might kill Hightower conflates the men who try to persuade him to leave out of affected concern and the unnamed, clandestine men who use terror and violence to try to force him to leave. That Hightower refuses to identify his attackers, moreover, leaves open the possibility that some of them may actually be members of the congregation. In this scenario, religious charity and organized terrorism have a shared objective, and this sheds light on the congregation's earlier aversion to Hightower's Lost Cause reveries. The maintenance of an *invisible* connection between the Church and organized terrorism seems somehow related to the Church's persistent failure to offer sanctuary for the socially persecuted. The depiction of Christian charity as merely a

politer form of social control suggests a religion that polices social boundaries—a stark contrast to Hightower’s father’s religion that, earlier, threatened to disrupt social conventions.

### 3. Volitionless Servants of Fatality: The Paradox of Evangelical Voluntarism and Cultural Determinism

Throughout the novel, the thematic interplay of race and religion highlight how the cultural inculcation of evangelicalism has restricted the religion’s ability to view Southern culture critically from a distinguishable perspective. For example, the first instances of Christmas’s racial “awakening,” or the moments in which he first becomes aware of some difference between himself and those around him, occur during his time at the orphanage, and these passages explicitly allude to the Gospels in a way that conflates Christ’s messianic secret with Christmas’ racial ambiguity. After Hines abandons his infant grandson, he gets a job at the orphanage as a custodian so that he can watch over the child—not as a caring guardian but as a detached observer. When the other children start to call Christmas “nigger,” Hines believes his intuition about her daughter’s lover has been confirmed: “Out of the mouths of little children He never concealed it. You have heard them. I never told them to say it, to call him in his rightful nature, by the name of his damnation. I never told them. They knowed. They was told, but it wasn’t by me” (128). Here Hines alludes to an episode in the Gospel of Matthew in which the chief priests overhear children at the temple singing of Jesus, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” When they ask Jesus to respond to the supposed blasphemy, Jesus cites Psalm 8: “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies / you have prepared praise for yourself” (*NRSV* Matthew 21:16). As is typical of the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, he escapes the snares

of his inquisitors by not speaking of himself directly but deferring to scripture and to the witness of others, in this case allowing the pure perception of children to reveal his messianic secret rather than blatantly defying his opponents. Hines skews the saying so that his belief in Christmas's "blackness" is legitimized as true when it is confirmed by the taunting of other children. It is a telling perversion of the Gospel scene, in that the children in the temple reveal Christ's identity when they praise him as the Son of David while the children at the orphanage "reveal" Christmas's "rightful nature" when they ostracize him as a black boy. In both cases, the implied secret identity is threatening to the prevailing order (a poor man from Nazareth claimed to be a royal descendent of David and a black boy "passing" as white in the early-twentieth-century South); however, the Gospel story imbues the children with subversively untaught perception while Faulkner's orphans perpetuate and mimic the racial hierarchy of the adult world they inhabit. In other words, the children of the Gospel are represented as seeing the divine truth because they are not blinded by the culturally compromised religious establishment of the chief priests; in Faulkner's version, the children's perception is no different than that of the establishment, and this parallels the way in which Southern evangelicalism, which was once able to view the center of Southern culture from a distinct religious vantage, eventually became so culturally inculcated that it lost its ability to perceive the dominant culture from an external point of view. In this way, Faulkner's counter-gospel allegorizes the way in which the Southern churches have "forfeited their prophetic role within their culture." As John Leigh Eighmy argues, "pressure from the social environment usually produced the silence, if not the sanction, of the local churches relative to the basic attitudes of the secular world. Thus, when these churches supported

slavery,” for instance, “they were confirming on moral grounds a position that their region had already determined on secular grounds” (19-20). The difference between the biblical passage that Hines alludes to and the scene that unfolds before him, therefore, tellingly confuses divine revelation and cultural status quo, the children “revealing” his already-held beliefs.

Faulkner further troubles Hines’s reasoning that the innocent children have spontaneously revealed the truth of Christmas’s race by suggesting an alternate explanation for the children’s “revelation” of Christmas’s hidden blackness. As a boy, Christmas was fond of the taste of toothpaste, and one day, having hidden in the school dietician’s closet to indulge his odd habit, he spies her secretly entering the bedroom with the superintendent. As the two adulterers reach orgasm in this bizarre scene, Christmas looks on from behind a curtain, toothpaste squeezing from the tube in his hand (120). When the dietician catches the boy, she calls him a “nigger,” thereby preemptively starting a rumor that would discredit him as a witness of her transgressions, in much the same way that Hines essentially exonerates himself of murder when he racializes his victim, Christmas’s father, as a black man. Christmas, in this sense, internalizes blackness not as a positive cultural identity but, in a highly Christological manner, as a sense of guilt for crimes he has not committed.<sup>14</sup> These biblical allusions, however, provide far more than a typological way of conceptualizing race in the South. When coupled with the preceding readings of Hightower’s story, they draw attention to the historical transfiguration of Southern evangelicalism from a movement of dissidence to

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<sup>14</sup> One of the problems of Faulkner’s exploration of the construction of race is that blackness is inevitably a figure for white sin, which, in turn, inhibits meaningful depictions of self-determination by black characters.

an engine of compliance. If the early evangelicals were more reminiscent of the perceptive children of the Synoptic Gospels, able to see Southern culture critically from a religious perspective outside of the compromised religious establishment, then postbellum evangelicals were more akin to Faulkner's orphans who can only confirm what Hines already believes to be true.

This paradoxical revelation of that which is already "known" presents an apt analogy for the way in which Southern religion is held captive by Southern culture, and it also speaks to another thematic paradox in the novel between voluntarism and determinism. This paradox is best understood in relation to the long-running critical commentary on the novel's depiction of the free individual in relation to the fixed community. Although the conceptualization and construction of the organic "Southern community" has been central to many discussions of the novel, these readings, by overemphasizing the community as a single character capable of collective thoughts and actions, sometimes lose sight of the fact that virtually every prominent character in the novel is somehow figured as an outsider.

The peculiar cast of misfits has not gone unnoticed, though. Brooks, for instance, describes the main characters as "pariahs, defiant exiles, withdrawn quietists, or simply strangers," and he pits these visible players against a "community [that] is the powerful though invisible force that quietly exerts itself in so much of Faulkner's work. It is the circumambient atmosphere, the essential ether of Faulkner's fiction" (52). In Brooks' reading, the "organic community" serves as "counterforce" that, while imperfect, offers a sense of stability and order that the characters lack and need. Thus, the invisible community, for Brooks, is like a gravitational pull that keeps the turbulent world from

drifting apart. Or, put another way, the outcasts are not in communion with the town of Jefferson and do not participate in its life due to their own “private obsession[s]” with the past, which put them, in a sense, out of time (60). Subsequent critics have read the invisible community as playing a more sinister, more coercive role in the novel; like Brooks, these critics attribute a great deal of power and influence to the community, whose gravity the outcasts can never truly escape and who remain in a liminal, geosynchronous orbit—neither fully integrated nor fully free of its centripetal force. Andre Bleikasten, for instance, notes that Brooks “is not content with underscoring the community’s pull and power”; instead, “he celebrates it as a ‘positive norm.’” Such an optimistic view of the community, he goes on to suggest, neglects “the possibility that alienation might originate, at least partially, in some flaw of the social fabric itself” (81-82). More recently, Scott Romine attacks the notion of the Southern “organic community” as a type of coercive cultural narrative that negates social dissent and projects an artificially cohesive society of consensus. Specifically, he reads *Light in August* as a narrative about the community narrating itself into being (193).

While I concur that the main characters of the novel are defined in contradistinction to what Michael Millgate calls “a whole community of undifferentiated Jeffersonians” (34), my interpretation departs in one important aspect: rather than attributing a quasi-mystical sense of volition and consciousness to the community, I consider the same characteristics at their face value—that is, rather than saying that the community’s invisibility, silence, and passivity in the drama of the narrative are dialectic signifiers of the community’s essentiality and supreme agency, I consider the ways in which the community, especially in its religious contexts and incarnations, is indeed

bound by a parodic narrative of undifferentiation. The community, in other words, does not clearly possess the authorial capacity that Romine attributes to them when he associates their subjectivity with that of the narrator. Neither does the community represent a stable antidote to the afflictions of modernity and alienation as Brooks suggests. Instead, the community, like the characters it rejects, are captive to the same cultural narratives they represent. In short, whereas criticism of the novel has tended to imbue the community with an immense degree of power, whether coercive or redemptive, I want to focus on the limitations of its power. In particular, the transformation of Southern evangelicalism from a potentially subversive and insurgent alternative to the prevailing social order into a non-threatening component within the social order presents a contextual basis for understanding the strangely inert character of the “invisible community” in *Light in August*. As Ted Atkinson observes, “Faulkner’s characters populate a fictional world in which family and community are gatherings of alienated individuals existing under nominal unity” (54).

By depicting a community, or perhaps an anti-community, of outcast characters alongside a less visible, less individualized community of insiders, the novel often reflects the relationship between religious extremism and religious moderation. Characters in the novel who exhibit the religiosity, fervor, and extremism that tend to be representative of the general religious character of the South in the popular imaginary are, in fact, often marginal to the community they are thought to represent, so that the margin paradoxically comes to represent the whole. By making these marginal figures central to the narrative, Faulkner exposes the process by which their absurd religiosity becomes representative rather than exceptional. As Wilson argues, characters like Reverend

Hightower and Doc Hines “are outside the community, but Faulkner shows that their beliefs are, in fact, central to the Southern culture he inherited. They are only extreme in the violence and the crazed enthusiasm with which they pursue them” (*Judgment and Grace in Dixie* 67). Brooks, earlier, made a similar observation: “Doc Hines’ distortions of this aspect of some of the Protestant sects, though they are those of a madman, are meaningful, for they constitute a serious caricature of views held by people who are quite ‘normal’” (63). Bleikasten, too, argues that, while Faulkner’s fanatics “may not be typical,” “they do the community’s dirty work, and act as the official agents of collective violence” (83). Thus, rather than dismissing the negative association between religious extremism and the religious mainstream, *Light in August* suggests that the extreme is latent in the mainstream, and this latency in turn disrupts the concept of a serene, moderate, paternalistic Southern community. For that reason, this apparent power of the invisible and undifferentiated community to exert its will through the dissociated actions of visible and individualized fanatics also represents an inherent weakness. Despite the containment of evangelical dissidence within Southern culture, in other words, religious fanaticism continues to pose a threat to the stability of the Southern community.

That marginalized and fanatic characters do ultimately represent the community makes their veritable exclusion from it all the more significant. Although no character in the novel represents any community of like-minded individuals, the narrative somehow generates the impression that such a community exists quietly in the background. This impression, I believe, causes readers to overlook subtle details in the narrative and even to misremember relatively significant plot points, as illustrated in the ways in which scholars have described the death of Joe Christmas. Leading up to Christmas’s death,

Percy Grimm, who has made it his prerogative as a national guardsmen to protect Christmas from communal vigilantism and uphold the sanctity of the justice system, is disappointed when no such antagonist materializes. In a way, Grimm has to become the absent lynch mob he wants to oppose, which is precisely what happens when he tracks Christmas down and, with no one else present, shoots and castrates him. He assumes the role of lynch mob in order to complete the prescribed narrative. Grimm makes this explicit when he castrates Christmas and exclaims, “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell.” While Grimm acts alone in his slaying of Christmas, the tendency to attribute Christmas’s death to the community is understandable, because the narrative of Christmas’ crime and murder carries all the trappings of the familiar lynch narrative, making it all the more strange that the key component, the hysterical mob, is missing.

Timothy Caron, for instance, attributes Christmas’ death to communal violence when he writes: After having this walking violation of their beliefs in their midst for so long, undetected, the townspeople must have vengeance....The community, therefore, responds with the time-honored Southern practice of lynching” (74). Eric Sundquist similarly argues that as soon as Christmas is identified as a black man, the slain Joanna Burden, who was the daughter of northern carpetbaggers and described as an outsider, “becomes as white and respectable and Southern as the communal hysteria requires” (84). While Burden is reconfigured to conform to the threat black masculinity is perceived to pose to Southern white womanhood, no sustained communal hysteria appears in the pages of the book. In fact, the community’s odd disinterest heightens the fanaticism of the outwardly hysterical characters Hines and Grimm. Doc Hines is unable to rile the community when he stands in the town square trying to incite passersby to

lynch his own grandson, Christmas. As the Sheriff reports to Byron, “The old man was downtown when I come home, hollering and ranting, calling folks *cowards because they wouldn’t take him out of jail right then and there and lynch him* [emphasis added]” (422-23). Clearly the “mob” has quickly lost interest in Christmas.

Yet another, older articulation of this misreading is seen in Jean-Paul Sartre’s reading of the scene, when he describes how the “‘good citizens’ have just hunted down the Negro, Christmas, and have castrated him” (381-382). He even pluralizes the subject and verbs of the action in his paraphrasing regardless of the fact that Grimm commits these actions alone. Moreover, he emphasizes that it was the “good,” respectable citizens, when in fact Grimm is described as a misfit who always feels out of place and time and is constantly infantilized by the Sheriff of Jefferson, a characterization comically reinforced when Grimm, in pursuit of Christmas, confiscates a boy’s bicycle.

Although it is correct that Christmas’ death be attributed not just to the crazed actions of individuals but to systemic racial violence in Southern culture, it remains puzzling that critics making this point gloss over obvious discrepancies. If Brooks, in suggesting that Christmas’ death was not a lynching, seems naïvely to neglect the figurative evocation of the lynch narrative, those who force the details of the text to conform completely to a more literal depiction of a mob lynching may be ignoring the complexity of the novel’s commentary on collective racial violence. Faulkner’s modifications to the familiar lynching narrative, moreover, seem particularly significant in light of the fact that only a year before *Light in August* was published, Faulkner had published a short story, “Dry September,” in which a hysterical white community *does* materialize and participate in the lynching of a black man. The absence of the hysterical

mob is significant, in other words, not because it absolves the community of the crime, but because it is unsuccessful at doing so. The futile absolution of the community's role in a murder committed by a single man parallels the feeble absolution of a Southern white evangelicalism that stresses individual morality over social justice. White Southern evangelicalism, in other words, anomalously acquiesces to social determinism in matters of race, despite its central emphasis on free will and voluntarism in spiritual matters.

Nevertheless, characters who are variously labeled "fanatic," "insane," or are otherwise marginalized tend to sublimate the violence that underlies the tranquility of the moderate center of the Southern community. This pattern is clearly illustrated toward the middle of the novel, when Christmas is on the run. The narrator gives us a description of the search party, exhausted and muddy from their pursuit of the fugitive. Postponing their efforts for another day, the weary men return to town. Interestingly, they are described in contrast to the townspeople, who remain curiously detached from the whole ordeal: "When they crossed the square the church bells were ringing, slow and peaceful, and along the streets the decorous people moved sedately beneath parasols, carrying Bibles and prayerbooks" (297). The picturesque Sunday crowd stands in stark contrast to the dirty men of the search party. Their "decorous" image is juxtaposed with the disheveled appearance of these intruders. That the pristine townspeople carry parasols, along with their Bibles and prayerbooks, further reinforces the notion that these respectable churchgoing citizens are somehow sheltered or shielded from the messiness of the manhunt and all of its social and racial implications.

Of the same men, the narrator says, "It was as if the very initial outrage of the murder carried in its wake and made of all subsequent actions something monstrous and

paradoxical and wrong, in themselves against both reason and nature” (296). This description emphasizes the strange separation between motive and action. Initially compelled by their outrage at the crime, they have since forgotten what is motivating and compelling them to move. They are on some level aware of the fact that what they are doing is “monstrous and paradoxical and wrong,” that they are acting outside of “reason and nature.” In short, they have become unwitting actors in a cultural drama, following a script that has already been written for them. Indeed, they have become like the very man they pursue, whom the narrators says “believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe,” so that, even prior to murdering Joanna, Christmas “say[s] to himself *I had to do it* already in the past tense; *I had to do it. She said so herself* (280).<sup>15</sup> The victim, in this configuration, is confused with the perpetrator, just as the search party is confused with the fugitive, and just as, following Christmas’s death at the hands of Grimm, Hightower has a vision in which Grimm’s and Christmas’s faces “strive [...] in turn to free themselves one from the other, then fade and blend again” (492).

In the scene of the weary searchers returning to town on Sunday morning, the men’s awareness of their ostensible loss of agency is enhanced by their juxtaposition with the decorous churchgoers, who move “sedately” in contrast to the “monstrous” actions and movements of the search party. The quiet religious community of the moderate center, then, almost exists in another realm, and in their sleep state, they are virtually incapable of action in the narrative. While their inaction is qualitatively different than the

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Kartiganer provides an excellent description of this sense of being volitionless when he writes that Christmas’s “life seems the most arbitrarily determined, as if he were invented by minds prior to the maturity of his own” (41).

agentless action of the search party, the two are more intimately related than they appear, for there is a discernible pattern of decentralization throughout the narrative that reinforces this picture of the moderate center (of white Sunday linens and parasols) being shielded from the conflicts that play out in the muddy, encircling margins. Again and again, the narrative illustrates how conflicts that originate in the center are pushed to the margins, so that the violence in the margins facilitates the calm of the center (Hightower's name, Gail, thus becomes a homophone for the violent gale that encircles the calm center, and his sermons are also described as cyclones). Simply put, the novel, through such images of decentralization, implicates even the docile Sunday crowd in the violence they do not directly commit.

Gregory Meyerson and Jim Neilson likewise consider the relationship between the center and the margin of the fictional community, offering a Marxist reading of the novel that rejects the view of Faulkner as a "clear-eyed critic of Southern racism." Such arguments, they summarize, have pointed to the ways in which the novel exposes the pathologies of a violently upheld racial hierarchy. The violent racist fanaticism portrayed by characters like Grimm and Hines, they argue, only serves as a counterpoint to characters like Gavin Stevens, who "embodies the virtuous Southern paternalist" (35-37). They demonstrate how the novel effectively neutralizes the fanaticism of resistance by associating it with the fanaticism of white supremacy. Faulkner, they write,

tended to see collective behavior of any sort as a threat to individuality, and thus associated radicalism (even unionism) with lynch mobs or fascism. These dueling and dual fanaticisms form the cornerstone of Faulkner's well-known anticommunism, in which various incarnations of left and right become equivalent extremes. Against these extremes, Faulkner's paternalism becomes unthreatening, commonsense moderation. (13)

In further support of this claim, Meyerson and Neilson argue that Faulkner suppresses the materialist context of the Depression, so that the actions of these marginal characters, like the bootlegging activities of Christmas and Burch, stem not from dire material conditions that necessitate such enterprises but from the characters' moral states. "The character system in *LIA*," they conclude, "suggests instability and violence are the effects of a fanaticism deriving from flawed character, rather than from class struggles inflamed by socio-economic catastrophe" (15-160).

By distinguishing between extremist and paternalist forms of racist ideology, Meyerson and Neilson show how the most blatantly violent expressions of Southern racism are easily critiqued from the safe distance of the gentrified center. They fail to consider, however, how the same configuration of "dueling extremes" can be read as a critique, rather than an endorsement, of the moderate, complacent community. While the novel may conflate the radical and reactionary extremisms that coexist on the social fringes of the fictional world, this does not necessarily imply a tacit endorsement of white paternalism. Rather than drawing attention to paternalism as the more peaceful alternative to extremism, the novel illustrates how conflict is simply displaced to the social margins.

By focusing almost exclusively on outcast characters, the novel consistently draws the readers' attention away from the moderate center, so that the "community" of Jefferson itself becomes oddly invisible. The effect, however, is not to exonerate the moderate community of the conflict that has been relocated to the margins but, conversely, to chip away at the façade of paternalistic quietude in the center, just as the exhausted and confused search party tracks mud into the clean town on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Ultimately, the novel implicates the moderate community in the very conflicts

it tries to distance itself from, which becomes especially apparent when we compare the center and margin in terms of the religious mainstream and the religious extreme.

In this sense, the novel illustrates how the social margin has been turned in upon itself. The fanaticism of white supremacists such as Hines represents a rechanneling of radical revivalist energies in the service of the moderate Southern community's interests. In *Light in August*, the antagonistic disposition of the backwoods evangelical survives, only the object of his antagonism is not the depraved cultural center but the margin itself. Whereas early evangelicals may have spoken against the leisurely vices of the gentry, Hines seems to speak on the center's behalf against those who occupy a social space more similar to his own. Thus Southern evangelicalism (especially white, fanatical Southern evangelicalism) is simultaneously an offender and enforcer of cultural taboos and norms. Although Hines, through his words and deeds, embodies the worst of Southern racism, he is himself rendered racially ambiguous in the novel. Described as a poor white who, with his wife, lives a relatively isolated life in a rural cabin outside of Jefferson, Hines is disenfranchised from the white community like the black characters he antagonizes and loathes. Later in the novel, when a member of the Jefferson community is describing Hines to another character, we learn that he has been going "singlehanded into remote negro churches and interrupting the service to enter the pulpit and in his harsh, dead voice and at times with violent obscenity, preach to them humility before all skins lighter than theirs" (343). Hines, then, is figured as a backwoods revivalist, only his message, unlike that of the other backwoods revivalist, Hightower's abolitionist father, is a blatantly irreligious gospel of black subordination. He maintains

the form of evangelical dissent but has altered its content by replacing its radical impulse to challenge social definitions with the fanatic impulse to reimpose them.

But Hines, in the eyes of white Jefferson, is himself defined in contrast to white normativity. In the same passage, the narrator reports, “The town looked upon them both (Hines and his wife) as being a little touched—lonely, gray in color, a little smaller than most other men and women, as if they belonged to a different race, species” (341). While his provisional whiteness makes him less vulnerable to unwarranted acts of injustice than the black community, Hines both literally and figuratively occupies the same narrative space as those whom he disparages. He is extreme in his message of white supremacy, yet he, too, is marginal like the co-marginalized congregations he abuses. In fact, Hines depends for his sustenance on the charity of black women, whom have been spied bringing food into his cabin. That the white community refers to him as Uncle Doc Hines, furthermore, reveals how they associate him with the black community. “Uncle,” of course, is a racially-charged appellation of black characters, especially of preachers or characters who exemplify Christian values, in addition to trickster characters who parody these qualities toward subversive ends. Hines has internalized the *values* of “whiteness” yet exists outside of the white community as a disenfranchised other. Thus, his racist words and actions serve not his own interests but the interests of an empowered Southern class from which he, like the black community he despises, is excluded.<sup>16</sup> When Doc Hines preaches racial inferiority to a black congregation, he enacts a fantastical affiliation with the empowered white community—fantastical because it blinds him to his actual

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<sup>16</sup> A paradox similar to Homi Bhabha’s concept of the colonial subject’s mimicry of the colonizer. See “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (1984): 125-133.

socioeconomic affiliation with the black community. That he enacts this fantasy in the same revival format that once brought blacks and whites together in culturally defiant worship (of the kind that was an embarrassment to Hightower's grandfather) begs more attention than it has received in extant criticism.

Such a narrative pattern in which internal conflicts are eventually consigned to the margin is also apparent in how the novel sanitizes conflict through communal memory. Recurring phrases that show how oblivion inevitably suppresses anxiety become a motif in the novel: when a Jefferson citizen, describing Hightower's scandalous past to Byron, says, "Then all of a sudden the whole thing seemed to blow away, like an evil wind. It was as though the town realised at last that he would be a part of its life until he died, and that they might as well become reconciled" (72-73); or when the narrator, describing how the town responded when they heard that Hines and his wife depended on the charity of "negro women" who brought food to their house, says, "it (the town) wondered about this for a time and then forgot it. In time the town either forgot or condoned because Hines was an old man and harmless" (341). This recurring sentiment establishes a pattern in which some initial conflict—Hightower's scandal, Hines' taboo dependence on the charity of blacks—is forgotten, "blow[n] away," "reconciled," or "condoned." What in the past was characterized as threatening and subversive is, in the present, perceived as "harmless." This motif of neutralization and containment parallels the way in which Southern evangelicalism becomes, by the twentieth century, characteristic of, rather than antagonistic toward, Southern culture—not because it is historically central to the dominant culture, but because the two "might as well become reconciled," so long as religion is rendered harmless and nonthreatening.

#### 4. Blessed Insurgence; or, Why Every Church Service in *Light in August* is Interrupted

In closing, I want briefly to discuss another pattern in the novel that further dramatizes both the confusion of Southern religion and Southern culture and also the threat of fanaticism latent in the religious mainstream. Throughout the narrative, Faulkner stages a series of scenes in which church services are interrupted. In these moments, the latent violence becomes briefly manifest but quickly forgotten. Almost invariably, depictions of religious services or gatherings are disrupted either by an inside or outside force, constituting a pattern of ecclesiological interruption in the novel that has not been directly explored in the extant criticism. Each of these scenes entails notable similarities. They each mention a pulpit as a specific site of interruption, which emphasizes not only the theme of religious discourse but of religious authority and ordination. They also each depict interruption in terms of sound and silence, and often the disruptive sound is an unintelligible or seemingly irrational voice. The unintelligibility of the source of interruption becomes another way in which the novel represents a religious deflection of social conflict, in that the conflict and resolution are enacted without regard for any articulated cause or reason. When that subaltern conflict threatens to reveal itself and rupture the illusion of a religion detached from the material and social problems of the culture at large, the source of the disruption is represented as unintelligible and anomalous.

In the first instance involving Hightower's wife, the narrator reports: "In the middle of the sermon she sprang from the bench and began to scream, to shriek something toward the pulpit, shaking her hands toward the pulpit where her husband had

ceased talking, leaning forward with his hands raised and stopped” (64-65). While this instance of interruption has in one sense left a lasting impression on the community, the meaning of or reason for the outburst is paradoxically elusive and vague, since her precise words are either unmemorable, unrepeatable, or unintelligible. While the congregation sympathizes with Hightower’s wife because they, too, have contempt for the minister, no intelligible basis for her protest is represented; she “shriek[s] *something*,” but no specific thing. The specifics of her complaint, in other words, are subordinate to the urgent need for the congregants to move on and get this conflict behind them. They respond only to the symptom of the underlying problem, the disruptive and indecorous “scene” the wife causes. But the extent of their speculation about the reason behind her outburst rests in their eagerness to color Hightower as deviant in some way by suggesting to Byron that the minister was unable to satisfy his wife’s sexual needs. In other words, her perceived hysteria is explained away by Hightower’s unmanliness, so that the cause—an impotent, effeminate, and incoherent minister—is circularly the same as the effect—his infertile, hysterical, and unintelligible wife.<sup>17</sup> Over-determined gender roles thus short-circuit the church’s ability to comprehend their own involvement in the unfolding crisis. Whenever the Church tries to play a more socially active role that could lead to a religious condemnation of problems in the social order, the novel contains the threat by characterizing religion as unintelligible and emotional. This unintelligibility

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<sup>17</sup> In her discussion of hysteria, Elaine Showalter addresses the “need to see how hysteria in men has always been regarded as a shameful, ‘effeminate’ disorder.” She writes, “In many early studies the male hysteric was assumed to be unmanly, womanish, or homosexual, as if the feminine component within masculinity were itself a symptom of disease. John Russell Reynolds wrote in *A System of Medicine* that hysterical men and boys were ‘either mentally or morally of feminine constitution.’ In his case studies of male hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century, Emile Batault observed that hysterical men were thought to be ‘timid and fearful men. . . . Coquettish and eccentric, they prefer ribbons and scarves to hard manual labor’” (289).

takes on various forms, including Hines's reactionary fanaticism and the ecstatic emotionalism of Hightower, his wife, and, most explicitly, the "screeching" black women described in the next instance of ecclesiological interruption.

Christmas's interruption of the revival service being held in a rural black church mirrors the scene with Hightower's wife in many ways. For instance, it also features unintelligible sounds:

In the middle of a hymn, there had come a tremendous noise from the rear of the church, and turning the congregation saw a man standing in the door. The door had not been locked or even shut yet the man had apparently grasped it by the knob and hurled it back into the wall so that the sound crashed into the blended voices like a pistol shot (322).

Here, the initial interruption is further dramatized and intensified by Christmas' slamming of an already-open door, a sound unintelligible in the sense of being gratuitous and unnecessary. That this interruption occurs in the "middle of a hymn" further emphasizes the theme of interruption and penetration, bringing to a halt the rhythmic progression of "blended voices" with a crashing sound "like a pistol shot." Christmas then approaches the pulpit to confront the minister, as reported by a younger boy from the church sent to the Sherriff of Jefferson for help:

And him done retch into the pulpit and caught Brother Bedenberry by the throat, trying to snatch him outen the pulpit. [...] Then he turned and clumb into the pulpit, where Brother Bedenberry had done clumb out the other side, and he stood there—he was all muddy, his pants and his shirt, and his jaw black with whiskers—with his hands raised like a preacher. And he begun to curse, hollering it out, at the folks, and he cursed God louder than the women screeching (323).

Like Hightower's wife, Christmas's utterances are unintelligible, and his "hollering" and cursing are explicitly compared to the hysteria of "women screeching" so that the basis of Christmas's protest is characterized in the sexist terms of irrational emotionalism.<sup>18</sup>

This scene is also tellingly different from the earlier interruption scene in that it takes place not in a Presbyterian church in Jefferson but in a nondescript black church in the countryside. Whereas Hightower's wife's outburst is depicted as being irrational from the perspective of the white congregation (just as Hightower's own sermons are likewise described by the congregation as being dreamlike and indecipherable), Christmas's unintelligible screeching is pitted against that of the women in the congregation. Their mutual hysteria becomes evident when the narrator indirectly paraphrases what the young boy reported to the Sheriff: "and another woman on the mourner's bench, *already in a semihysterical state*, sprang up and whirled and glared at him for an instance with white rolling eyes and screamed, 'It's the devil!' [emphasis added]" (322). The narrator is careful to explain that the woman was already hysterical, even before Christmas's violent intrusion. If the narrator's point of view most closely resembles that of the white community of Jefferson, as Scott Romine argues it does,<sup>19</sup> then the congregants of the black revival service appear just as unintelligible to the white community as Christmas is

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<sup>18</sup> Reminiscent of how early revivalism was characterized in gendered terms of emotional excess that went against the grain of masculinized views of dogmatic religious authority.

<sup>19</sup> Romine traces the "focal paths" of the narrative to determine in which subjectivities the narrator's knowledge of events originates. Parsing a similar passage to the one at hand, in which the narrator reports what anonymous townsmen have told Byron, Romine writes: "Although the story is consistently focalized through the community — 'the people' and the 'the town' are cited repeatedly—what originally appears as transposed speech ('they' speaking through the narrator) gradually demonstrates more and more features of narratized speech (the narrator speaking for 'them'), finally terminating in what appears very much like pseudo diegesis. The effect of this narrative transfer is to align the primary narrator and the embedded collective narrator, the latter of which seems to merge with the former without a clear line of demarcation being drawn. The narrator thus (pseudo diegetically) assumes the community's perspective not only at the level of focalization, but at the level of narration itself." The effect of this technique, however, is not to condone the white community's perspective but to force the reader to "apprehend the discursive practices" that produce and reproduce the stories that the white community circulates (165).

to both the white and black communities of Jefferson. While Hightower and his wife seem unintelligible to the respectable and orderly white congregation, there is less of a distinction, from the (white) narrator's perspective, between the unintelligible interrupter (Christmas) and the unintelligible interrupted (the revivalists). All are rendered nonthreatening to the dominant social order by virtue of their incoherence and decentered position.

Christmas is also described by the young boy as having "his hands raised like a preacher." He thus mirrors Hightower, who, following his wife's outburst, "lean[ed] forward with his hands raised and stopped" (65). But what, in the center of town, is Hightower's dreamlike sermonizing that hovers like a cyclone that never actually touches the ground becomes, in the rural margins, a literal (and lateral) act of violence toward the congregants. At the center of town, only a vague impression of latent violence is present. Beyond the containment area of the center's vertical religion, however, words become actions as Christmas, having attacked Brother Bedenberry, knocks seventy-year-old Pappy Thompson to the ground and threatens the church deacons with a raised chair. There is nothing to contain the violence that has been displaced to these marginal spaces where, from the perspective of the white community, fanatics like Doc Hines and his grandson Christmas are no different than the "semihysterical" revivalists being attacked.

In the third instance of ecclesiological interruption, unintelligibility plays a similar role of obscuring the underlying source of conflict. As earlier cited, the narrator paraphrases an account of Hines given to Byron by the townsmen of nearby Mottstown. They report that Hines had been going into "remote negro churches and interrupting the service to enter the pulpit and in his harsh, dead voice and at times with violent obscenity,

preach to them humility before all skins lighter than theirs, preaching the superiority of the white race, himself his own exhibit A, in fanatic and unconscious paradox.” While the message of white supremacy in this case seems fairly blunt and intelligible, though unintelligent, the white men conveying the account draw attention to the “unconscious paradox” that Hines is the worst possible exhibit of a superior race. Thus, Hines is unintelligible to himself, unaware of the irony and meaning of the scene, which can only be understood from the outside perspective of the white community. The same men also speculate that the black congregants “probably did not listen to, could not understand much of, what he said. Perhaps they took him to be God Himself, since God to them was a white man too and his doings also a little inexplicable” (343-44). The threat that this scene neutralizes, then, is the threat of recognition, that either Hines or the congregants he taunts might grasp the implications of their mutual subordination in the eyes of the white community. Their inability to comprehend one another, in other words, keeps them divided, and a divided margin is less threatening to the center.

In the last instance of ecclesiological interruption, it is not the interrupter, Hightower’s grandfather, who speaks unintelligibly, but rather the “fanaticfaced country preachers” who “thundered anathema from the rustic pulpit at his oblivious and unregenerate head” (472). In this country setting, the cavalier grandfather, who embodies the culture of the Old South and the Lost Cause, remains a stark contrast to the rural revivalists who curse him, but he is “oblivious” to their speech. It is as if, symbolically, he has ridden his horse out to the same “chapel back in the hills” that his son, to his embarrassment, had ministered at before the War. In order to preserve his highly masculinized vision of Southern culture and to symbolically go back in time and save his

son from the effeminate pursuit of ministering to the poor and downtrodden, he tries to lure men away from the revivals with the leisurely pleasures of gambling and horseracing.

The recurrence of religious interruptions that entail and incite shrieking, cursing, hollering, screeching, “violent obscenity,” and “thunder[ing] anathema,” while ostensibly moments when religious order and stability are disrupted or upset, become paradoxically predictable and commonplace in the novel through their sheer repetition. The routinization of church is persistently inhibited by some unexpected crisis or interruption, yet the repetition of these irregularities themselves establish new and increasingly ritualized images of crisis. In other words, the disruption of church becomes a routine part of the church service in the novel, so that what is by definition abnormal becomes normative.<sup>20</sup>

Because evangelicalism has been appropriated as one of the unifying forces in Southern culture, the possibility that the same religion could undermine that which we take it to represent often escapes notice. *Light in August* walks a fine line between revealing this possibility and concealing it. Through images of ecclesiological interruption and rupture, Faulkner depicts a Southern religion that is in constant crisis yet maintains an illusion of permanence and stability. But the source of this latent volatility stems equally from the center’s latent complicity in the social unrest that plays out in the margins and the forgotten legacy of revivalism that always threatens to breach established social barriers. Volatility and ambiguity, in other words, can give rise to new cultural

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<sup>20</sup> This pattern resembles the theory of routinization developed by Max Weber in his archetypal reading of Hebrew prophets, discussed on page 16 above. In *Light in August*, episodes of religious interruption become so routine that it is easy to ignore the threat of alternative and intervening forms of religious authority.

values just as readily as they can lead to the reassertion of older values. That nearly all represented church services in the novel are interrupted challenges the fabricated notion of an uncontested, stable evangelical heritage that is central to, rather than antagonistic toward, Southern culture at large. Ultimately, the distance between the “chapel back in the hills” evangelized by Hightower’s father before the Civil War and Hightower’s more centralized Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century draws attention to a discontinuity in Southern evangelicalism that undercuts the misperception of religious continuity in the region and suggests a residual tension between Southern religion and Southern culture.

## Chapter Four

### The Prophet as Spectacle: the Limits of Commodified Religion in the Works of Flannery

O'Connor

*Southern identity is not really connected with mocking birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads. Nor is it necessarily show forth in the antics of our politicians, for the development of power obeys strange laws of its own. An identity is not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that can become a cliché. It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist.*

- Flannery O'Connor in "The Regional Writer" (846-47)<sup>21</sup>

The idea of the Bible Belt has secured religion's place at the center of Southern culture, making it difficult to recognize any *countercultural* aspects of Southern religion represented in fiction. The assumption that a certain religious disposition synecdochally represents the culture of the South at large predisposes readers to overlook aspects of the region's complex religious heritage that do not coincide with other assumptions about the South. As I established in the first chapter, there is no *natural* affinity between evangelicalism and Southern culture. As evangelicalism became central to more Southerners' lives throughout the nineteenth century, however, many of the religion's earlier characteristics that went against the grain of the dominant culture became less pronounced. This chapter explores how Flannery O'Connor's fiction attempts to defamiliarize Southern religion so that it becomes more visibly eccentric and thus more viably countercultural in relation to both mainline Southern evangelicalism and Southern culture in general. Much of O'Connor's fiction, like Faulkner's *Light in August*, dramatizes how Southern religion has been so thoroughly integrated into the culture that

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<sup>21</sup> Quotes are from *Collected Works* unless otherwise noted.

it has lost its prophetic vision or its ability to examine other Southern cultural institutions and norms from a marginal point of view. As Ralph C. Wood argues, O'Connor sought to "preserv[e] the scandal and offence of the gospel" by focusing on radical and fanatic religious figures who were the exception, and not the rule, of Southern Protestantism (72). In my reading of O'Connor short stories and her first novel, *Wise Blood*, the conflict between prophetic religion (as a countercultural perspective capable of disrupting the dominant culture) and accommodationist religion (as an integral component of maintaining that dominant culture) underlies her representations of Southern religion.

As do her stories, O'Connor's commentary on religion and culture reveal a persistent concern over the entanglement of religion and culture: "The Church," she writes bluntly, "is not a culture." While here she speaks specifically of the Catholic Church, her understanding necessarily extends to her Protestant characters, whom she uses to represent the lowercase "c" catholic, or universal, Christian community:

He (the Catholic novelist in the South) may feel that the kind of religion that has influenced Southern life has run hand in hand with extreme individualism for so long that there is nothing left of it that he can recognize, but when he penetrates to the human aspiration beneath it, he sees not only what has been lost to the life he observes, but more, the terrible loss to us in the Church of human faith and passion. (860)

O'Connor, in this passage, implies that the radically catholic impulse of Southern religion is unrecognizable in the image of the modern Southern fundamentalist, and she suggests that her fiction tries to bring this hidden "human aspiration" to the surface. We must "penetrate to the human aspiration beneath it," she writes, and the "it" that must be penetrated refers explicitly to a religion that "run[s] hand in hand" with cultural values. For O'Connor, then, the marriage between religion and culture is detrimentally superficial. Below the Bible Belt, she suggests, lies a religion embedded within, but not

synonymous with, the culture it has been made to signify. While the Southern fanatic in fiction often espouses reactionary ideologies that stem from “extreme individualism,” the trope nevertheless retains the seeds of cultural dissent. If these figures are spokespersons for widely-held Southern cultural values, then their discontent and the narrative conflicts they generate seem baseless, irrational, and erratic. This seemingly unfounded tension points to an unspoken antagonism between religion and culture.

The catch in using images of religious eccentricity to conceptually reinvigorate Southern religion as a countercultural force, however, is that Southern eccentricity was itself insufficiently subversive, because it fed into the demand of mid-century consumer culture for both romanticized and exoticized Southern imagery. In the above epigraph, in fact, O’Connor alludes to this dually contrived imagery with the competing signifiers of the sentimental mocking bird and the sinister hookworm. According to Wendell Berry, there are two equally problematic applications of the word “regionalism.” On the one hand, regionalism, like exceptionalism and patriotism, connotes a sense of pride that tends to inhibit self-criticism; on the other, it implies a pejorative and caricaturizing image of a particular region, “which specializes in the quaint and the eccentric and the picturesque [...]. These varieties, and their kindred, have in common a dependence on false mythology that tends to generalize and stereotype the life of a region” (934). The concept of regionalism mirrors that of nationalism in many ways. In the popular imaginary, the South is either a picturesque embodiment of the pastoral or a grotesque caricature of the deprived, and these hyperbolic images are so ubiquitous in popular culture—in films, fiction, advertisements, and newspapers—that they reify caricature as authentic representation. If O’Connor intends the figure of the Southern religious fanatic

to revive the scandal and offence of the Gospel, as Wood suggests, then she must overcome a readership that might be desensitized by the conventionality of such grotesque images of the South or might hold to a more pastoral image of the South and its religion, against which image the religious fanatic appears a perversion, not a preservation, of the South's religious heritage.

One of the primary dilemmas O'Connor faces in her representations of Southern religion, therefore, is the recovery of a genuinely prophetic and countercultural Southern religious experience that does more than conform to the superficial consumer expectations of both religious indigeness and religious excess. Parody helps O'Connor counter these popular expectations, because it has the power to defamiliarize tropes so familiar that they lack the capacity to push conventional boundaries. If the Southern fanatic had become a familiar and even permissible aberration at the time of O'Connor's writing, then that commonplace figure would have been neither scandalous nor offensive. Hence O'Connor's occasional remarks on the inherent naiveté behind the popularity of the Southern grotesque: "I find that any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be called 'grotesque' by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called 'photographic realism'" (860). Underlying such biting criticism of Northern prejudice is O'Connor's tacit frustration with the desensitizing effect that the lure of Southern sensationalism has on the grotesque's ability to shock and awaken a lethargic consumer culture to the perils of spiritual complacency.

O'Connor's parodic and grotesque representations of the South, rather than directly imitating Southern life, imitates prevalent narrative constructs of Southern life. In this way, she reveals how the cultural narrative of Southern religiosity prescriptively

limits religious Southerners' capacity for self-determination. Thus, when O'Connor wrote that "Religious enthusiasm is accepted as one of the South's more grotesque features, and [that] it is possible to build upon that acceptance, *however little real understanding such acceptance may carry with it [emphasis added]*" (*Mystery and Manners* 204), she plainly indicated her intention to build upon her readers' *misperceptions* of Southern religion rather than simply draw upon her direct observations. In other words, we cannot reliably accept that her fiction blindly adheres to or "replicates" the Bible Belt narrative as a "real" history that exists outside of its own telling. We can ask, however, what O'Connor accomplishes by producing a metanarrative that "builds upon" her reader's consumer expectations of a grotesque Southern religious enthusiasm.

In her essay "The Regional Writer," O'Connor suggests a "hidden" and "deep" Southern identity that transcends clichéd images. Specifically, she identifies the religious facets of Southern identity as potentially subverting the caricatured surfaces of Southern culture. "Behind our own history, deepening it at every point, has been another history. Mencken called the South the Bible Belt, in scorn and thus in incredible innocence" (847). O'Connor clearly conveys the notion of an unseen or forgotten past that lies "[b]ehind" the surface of "history." But she associates that supposedly deeper history with caricature, since Mencken, a fellow satirist, coined the phrase "the Bible Belt" to denote an unenlightened region in which religion hinders progress. O'Connor thus sees in Southern religion something more countercultural and enduring than any cliché or caricature of the imagined Bible Belt can convey. Mencken's Bible Belt image, therefore, connotes the same "[r]eligious enthusiasm" that is ignorantly "accepted as one of the South's more grotesque features." In the same way that she "builds upon" an acceptance

of religious grotesquerie *because* of the lack of “real understanding such acceptance may carry,” she builds upon the image of the Bible Belt *because* it is conceived in “incredible innocence.” In other words, O’Connor’s fiction parodically feeds into what she believes are misperceptions of Southern religion—an ad absurdum critique of the limits of caricature—in order to reveal a quality of the religion irreducible to cliché.

Like Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower in *Light in August*, O’Connor’s hyper-religious characters often take center stage despite their being invariably atypical and unrepresentative of the Southern communities whose margins they inhabit. Even O’Connor’s famous line that the South is Christ-haunted and not Christ-centered implies that religion has a centripetal relation to culture in the region. Something about the predominant religion, in this view, is in perpetual tension with the center of Southern culture; the religion shapes and directs Southern culture but is never integral to it. In fact, O’Connor’s religious characters, she acknowledges, are not representative of the typical South, Southerner, or Southern Christian:

[s]ome tell me that Protestantism in the South is not at all the way I portray it, that a Southern Protestant would never be concerned, as Hazel Motes is, with penitential practices. Of course, as a novelist I’ve never wanted to characterize the typical South or the typical Protestantism. The South and the religion found there are extremely fluid and offer enough variety to give the novelist the widest range of possibilities imaginable, for the novelist is bound by reasonable possibilities, not the probabilities, of his culture. (*MM* 164-5)

Here, she carefully distinguishes between “the South and the religion found there,” refusing to conflate the two. The idea of an “extremely fluid” religion, furthermore, runs counter to an essentialist understanding of a uniform and coherent Bible Belt religion. By focusing on atypical figures and features of both the South and its wide range of religious expressions, O’Connor brings marginal figures to the center of her fictional worlds. In

this way, her works take on a carnivalesque quality. O'Connor's representations of the Bible Belt are "bound" by the "reasonable possibilities," if "not the probabilities," of Southern culture. In addition to cultural restrictions, the constraint of "recognizability" necessarily includes the imaginative constraints of how the South has, is, and can be potentially be depicted.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, her representations are constrained by the cultural narrative of the Bible Belt, which renders illegible what, in reality, O'Connor acknowledges is an "extremely fluid" and variegated compilation of religious experiences. From within such confines, however, she pushes the limits of convention by focusing on the improbable and atypical, presenting readers with characters that exist on the fringe, rather than at the center, of both Southern and American life.

Far from reproducing a civil religion that incorporates religious imagery and cultural customs and values, O'Connor believed that Southern religion, in its possible but improbable form, provided a distinct view of Southern society from a separated, and potentially antagonistic, perspective. Wood therefore distinguishes O'Connor from earlier agrarians such as Allen Tate who envisioned a strategic alliance between Southern religiosity and a broader regional resistance to secular nationalism. O'Connor, in contrast to Tate's "urbane program to revive the cultural unity of the West," writes Wood, "was convinced that thorny Christianity of the Southern kind, despite its many failings, preserved the scandal and offence of the gospel as a radical corrective to the best no less than the worst of cultures and civilizations" (72). Such thorniness captures a quality of evangelicalism that critics sometimes overlook: from the outset, Southern evangelicalism

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<sup>22</sup> "The parodic text," according to Linda Hutcheon, "is granted a special license to transgress the limits of convention, but, as in the carnival, it can do so only temporarily and only within the controlled confines authorized by the text parodied—that is, quite simply, within the confines dictated by '*recognizability*' [emphasis added]" (75).

existed as a thorn in the side of the same culture with which it would later be conflated in our regional and national memory. In this way, O'Connor's religious characters become more like the eighteenth-century evangelicals that, "far from dominating the South, were viewed by most whites as odd at best and subversive at worst" (Heyrman 221). In a South that has normalized evangelicalism, O'Connor's insistence on religious misfits—fanatic characters that do not quite fit into the culture that produces and sustains them—seems to represent the Bible Belt as a paradox. By definition, a misfit cannot be indicative of the average inhabitant of a vast region, and as O'Connor asserts, her fiction is not concerned with averages: "In a great deal of popular criticism, there is the notion that all fiction has to be about the Average Man," she writes; "But if life, in that [ordinary] sense, satisfied us, there would be no sense in producing literature at all." Thus, mainstream Southern religion does not appeal to O'Connor; on the contrary, she sets out to depict Southern religion in expressly countercultural terms.

As Wood observes, O'Connor "worrie[d] that the same fundamentalists whose Jesus-obsession she admired were dangerously gnostic in their denial of the sacramental presence of God in the natural order, whether in artistic creation or in the created cosmos itself" (45). What drew her to these characters was not their cosmological vision that transcended social concerns, but their antagonism toward the very culture that the Bible Belt narrative depicts them as representing. Because of their fanaticism, Southern fundamentalists themselves were socially disenfranchised from moderate mainline Protestantism. The fact that Southern fundamentalism was alienated from national life and Western culture, according to Wood, made it admirable to O'Connor. O'Connor was wary of religion becoming culturally captive, and this was true no less of Southern

culture than it was of Western or American culture. To better understand what it was about the fundamentalist that rang true to her own religious conviction, therefore, we need to consider any veins of fundamentalism or revivalist evangelicalism that are separable from the culture in which they thrive. Such separation enables religion to fulfill its prophetic role, in Max Weber's sense, of examining predominant values through a sectarian lens.

O'Connor's fiction displays a conscious preoccupation with the restrictions that consumer perceptions of the Bible Belt place on what the South and its religion can conceivably signify. According to Farrell O'Gorman, O'Connor, along with fellow Catholic Southern author Walker Percy, often critiqued the "region's obsession with a romanticized past." By the middle of the twentieth century,

[T]hat native obsession—so powerfully explored in the literature of the three preceding decades—had been appropriated by and subsumed into an increasingly powerful national media, so that mass-produced images of the South suddenly became more prominent in the new hyperreal consumer culture of the United States and the region itself than had previously been possible. (179-80).

The story "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" (1955) offers a striking example of how O'Connor explores the power of widespread consumer images to caricature the South in a way that hinders a more nuanced understanding of the region and its cultures. In it, a hundred-and-four-year-old, wheelchair-bound Confederate veteran, General George Poker Sash, is set to participate in his granddaughter's college Commencement ceremony. Sally Poker Sash had "prayed every night that he (her grandfather) would live until her graduation from college," because she feared she might be "cheated out of her triumph" (134). A long-time teacher, she is now graduating with a degree in elementary education at the age of sixty-two, following twenty years of summer school, because,

“when she started, there were no such things as degrees” (134). Through her grandfather, Sally wants to show the younger generation—“all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living”—that “‘what was behind her’ . . . was not behind them.” In her bitterness and as a form of “mild revenge,” the narrator adds, “she always taught in the exact way she had been taught not to teach” (134). Sally feels superior to a younger generation of Southerners, and her grandfather, in her mind, proves that her experience and heritage is more authentically Southern than that of others.

But O’Connor undercuts Sally’s pretenses at every turn. The General suffers from senility, cannot even remember his children, let alone the Civil War, even though Sally tells the Dean at her college that his “mind was still clear as a bell.” The veteran does, however, remember the film *Gone with the Wind*,<sup>23</sup> because twelve years earlier Sally had brought him to the premiere in Atlanta, where he was part of the pageantry, with “floats full of Miss Americas and Miss Daytona Beaches and Miss Queen Cotton Products.” At this premiere he “received the general’s uniform,” even though he “had probably been a foot soldier” in the War (134-135).<sup>24</sup> Not her grandfather’s experiences, actions, or memories, but merely his old age make him a quantifiable, if unqualified, link to the Southern past. Stripped of the cognitive capacity for meaningful historical reflection, the General is remade to meet the demands that modern consumers place on the past. Sally’s fervent claims to an authentic heritage, therefore, rely on the same popular conceptions of Southern history that she associates with the young “upstarts”

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<sup>23</sup> O’Connor does not name the exact film, but the date and place make the allusion unmistakable.

<sup>24</sup> Sally’s aggrandizement of her Confederate grandfather thus resembles that of Faulkner’s Reverend Hightower, who imagines—often out loud from his pulpit—that his grandfather was a courageous cavalryman who had stormed Union storehouses after the War. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hightower’s grandfather was basic infantry and was more likely shot by another Confederate veteran’s widow for stealing chickens.

who do not “have behind them” the strong Southern inheritance that is “behind her.” That she teaches her own grade students in the exact opposite way that her training recommends suggests that Sally’s defiant sense of heritage is inherently shortsighted. She refuses to learn and, in her stubborn approach to teaching young children, perpetuates the mindset that the meaning of Southern history is self-evident and should not be an object to scrutiny. While on the surface Sally’s defiance stems from the isolationist mentality one might expect from an “authentic” Southerner, consumer culture—within and without the South—remains the ultimate policing agency in the Southern imagination. Sally traces her roots to her veteran grandfather, whose only war stories are his recollections of pretty California women at a 1939 Civil War movie premiere, which he describes as a “nashnul,” not local, event.

In the story’s conclusion, no one, including Sally, notices that the General has died on stage. After the ceremony, Sally finds her grandfather’s corpse in line at a Coca-Cola machine, having been wheeled there by her Boy Scout nephew, John Wesley. As O’Gordon observes, “Since Sally Poker Sash and the ‘General’ himself conceived their traditions and history in the terms provided them by a Hollywood hit, it is fitting that he end in the careless hands of a forgetful descendent and beside a symbol of the twentieth-century South’s own greatest financial success story” (181). This story, O’Gorman points out, “satirizes a false historical consciousness rather than historical consciousness itself.” In this way, O’Connor interrogates the production and consumption of historically vacant images. Similar to Berry’s description of both nationalism’s and regionalism’s mutual “dependence on false mythology,” O’Gorman suggests that this kind of “Southern simulacra,” or “superficial copies of images that had been false to begin with,” inhibited

historical consciousness in a way that left many Southerners “only dimly aware of its (the South’s) own ongoing upheaval in a time when forces of cataclysmic social change were making themselves felt in the land” (180-81). In his study of Southern memory, W. Fitzhugh Brundage writes, “Southerners...have the reputation of being among the most historically oriented of peoples and of possessing the longest, most tenacious memories. The notion that the South is a place saturated with history,” he sarcastically adds, “is self-evident, commonsensical” (2). Sally exhibits precisely this kind of false historical tenacity in O’Connor’s story, and she certainly believes the historical significance of her memoryless grandfather to be “self-evident.” But this historical “saturation” paradoxically inhibits historical consciousness, because the meaning of the past is always apparent and warrants no further scrutiny. Such scrutiny, Brundage suggests, might reveal that the “historical South” does not stem from “some innate regional properties,” but from “decades of investment, labor, and conscious design by individuals and groups of individuals who have imagined themselves as ‘Southerners’” (2-3).

The imaginative construction of a distinct Southern religion has been a central component in the overall project of Southern memorialization that Brundage describes. While acknowledging the centrality of religion in Southern culture, O’Connor often tries to extricate religion from the kind of false historical consciousness she satirizes in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.” To be sure, her representations of Southern religion also constitute a form of historical “investment, labor, and conscious design” (Brundage 3), but O’Connor goes against the grain of the Southern imagination in order to pierce the façade of Bible Belt nostalgia and at least to suggest, if not recover, a less “evident” religious heritage. In the process, she often reveals the immense difficulty of representing

Southern religion in a way that defies its predetermined forms in both the regional and national imaginary. At the end of “A Late Encounter,” the nephew standing with the dead veteran in line at the vending machine is named John Wesley.<sup>25</sup> This name alludes to the eighteenth-century English minister who helped found Methodism, an evangelical movement focused on revivalism that would later become the second largest evangelical denomination in the South, following Baptists. O’Gorman’s dismissal of the boy as a “forgetful descendent” who is no more indicative of the Southern past than the New South image of the Coca-Cola machine, reveals a mass-produced popular religion whose historical significance is simultaneously forgotten and self-evident. O’Connor often uses grotesque images like this to free Southern religion from consumer captivity while concurrently reflecting on the relative inadequacy of such extreme representations that similarly feed into a particular consumer demand for an exotic South.

If Southern memory has been hijacked by fetishistic images, what forgotten history of Southern religion lies dormant in O’Connor’s grotesque religious landscapes? That such a notably religious author as O’Connor was also clearly concerned with false historical consciousness makes it imperative to read her representations of, and reflections on, Southern religion with the same eye for satire warranted by other dubious Southern tropes like the falsely heroized “General.” The conflict that religion generates in O’Connor’s imagination belies the popularly perceived “natural” affinity between Southern culture and its predominant religion. Like a transplanted organ that the host body rejects as foreign, religion in O’Connor’s South often takes on an alien, even antagonistic, character. Her religious characters are misfits who never quite fit into

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<sup>25</sup> This character reappears in O’Connor’s better-known “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

Southern culture but are inextricably bound to it. Throughout her fiction, she returns to the figure of the “Christian malgré lui,”<sup>26</sup> or unwitting Christian (1265). As a type of prophet, the Christian malgré lui can never fully integrate into the mainstream of Southern life. In the false historical consciousness of the Southern imagination, Christianity is an inescapable given for the consummate Southerner; in the historical subconscious, however, Christianity remains recessively foreign. Thus, eccentric religious figures, whom religion pulls in opposing directions, dramatize the competing cultural narratives of centric and eccentric religion with which this project is concerned. Understood satirically, the centrality of religious eccentricity in O’Connor’s fiction mirrors the commodification of the religiously exotic in a way that domesticates and subdues an otherwise foreign and potentially threatening prophetic religion.

Many critics, however, overlook O’Connor’s satirical representation of the Bible Belt, in large part because of her devoutness as a Catholic. Her religious interests make it tempting to view O’Connor as an uncritical champion of Southern religion. Timothy Caron, for instance, has aptly observed that O’Connor’s fiction “replicates the white church’s silence over unjust racial practices that arose from a militant emphasis upon personal salvation and redemption,” but he too easily mistakes “replication” as endorsement rather than parody. In the same way that Sally’s pretensions of cultural authenticity ironically replicate and perpetuate neatly-packaged consumer images of the South, religion in O’Connor’s fiction is less an uncritical replication than a parody that mirrors the conventions of Southern religion while trying to point beyond them. In contrast to readers like Caron, some critics more defensively accept O’Connor’s Bible

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<sup>26</sup> Here, O’Connor describes Hazel Motes, the protagonist of her first novel, but this conceptual figure is a mainstay in O’Connor’s fiction.

Belt religion as an unparodic critique of secular culture. In this chapter's epigraph and in fiction like "A Late Encounter," O'Connor displays a special disdain for consumer culture, and prophetic religion often serves as a vehicle of dissent for characters underserved and dispossessed by the forces of modernization. But O'Connor simultaneously reveals Southern religion to be, in part, a product of modern culture. In some of the scenes I discuss below, the "foreign" character of Southern religion that might make it a viable form of cultural dissent are sublimated into quirks and eccentricities that feed into the consumer demand for religious spectacle.

In the story "Greenleaf," Mrs. May is a respectable, middleclass widow, landowner, and a "good Christian" (316), but she characterizes her hired hands, the trashy Greenleaf family, as animals: Mrs. May "was a country woman only by persuasion," unlike the "real country people," whose faces she could read like they read "the sunrise and sunset." While Mrs. May reads them, they read nature. They are part of the natural landscape and even, implicitly, closer to God (318). She views Mrs. Greenleaf as being especially shiftless, since she is preoccupied with "prayer healing" rather than tending to her children or household chores. Ritualistically, Mrs. Greenleaf clips news articles about raped women, burned children, escaped prisoners, train wrecks, and "the divorces of movie stars," and she brings them to the woods and buries them. Mrs. May witnesses her as she "fell on the ground over them and mumbled and groaned for an hour or so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt" (316). Thus, Mrs. Greenleaf resembles the bull that Mrs. May, in story's the opening, sees "paw[ing] the ground" (311). The religion of "real country people" comes across as more authentic and natural than that of Mrs.

May, who faithfully goes to church but does not believe any of it is true. While the story conveys a sense of unseen depth to the Greenleaf family's unseemly religion, these characters nonetheless appear to the reader, through the eyes of Mrs. May, as a spectacle of religious eccentricity, whose authenticity has been preserved through geographical, economic, and social isolation from modern life. O'Connor draws attention to the way the Greenleafs' religion is, in some ways, a minstrel performance of Southern religion. We sympathize with the Greenleafs, but their religion seems hopelessly incapable of alleviating their own suffering and dire socioeconomic condition, focused as their faith is on the healing of divorced movie stars and victims of freak accidents whose grotesque headlines appeal to consumers far more than the banality of systemic poverty. In this story, religious differentiation overtly parallels class differentiation, but the consumer expectation of a coherent Bible Belt simultaneously deemphasizes religious heterogeneity and forecloses religion as a means of social dissent. Mrs. Greenleaf's grotesque religion is so *conventionally* grotesque that it fails to subvert the conventions that contain it. As parody, however, the story critiques the conventions that inform its depiction of religious eccentricity.

In addition to their physical and behavioral eccentricities, O'Connor's eccentric religious characters are often socially disenfranchised; they are poor, unseemly, and disreputable—the visual antithesis of Southern gentility. They often live in rural isolation, as in the case of *The Violent Bear it Away*'s Francis Tarwater, kidnapped at a young age by his fanatically religious great uncle, Mason Tarwater, and raised to distrust others, especially people from the city like Francis's Uncle Raybur. Raybur is a social worker who, like Francis, had been kidnapped by Mason, but he escaped, moved to the

city, renounced religion, and became a social worker. When, at the outset of the story, Mason dies, Raybur swoops in and tries to rescue Francis. Since Raybur naturally associates his uncle's abuses with his religion, Raybur also assumes that the best way to save Francis is to save him from religion, to deprogram the brainwashed child. In one sense, religion has become the captor of marginalized, poor country folk, who appear as their own religion's victims. It is both ironic and perverse that a religion first cultivated in the margins of Southern society should be subsequently centralized so that the modern religious eccentric, in consumer culture, becomes an intensified extension of the enfranchised Southern community. As a result, the possibility of a countercultural religion that serves the needs of its most fervent adherents seems unfathomable. By parodying the conventions that remove the countercultural tendencies of Southern religion and identify religion as the source of, and not a symptomatic response to, social marginalization, O'Connor exposes the conventions themselves as cordoning off that in Southern religion which threatens the social order and might empower, rather than disempower, the devout.

These marginalized characters' aberrational behaviors often come across as irrational and absurd rather than being direct products of, or even forms of protest against, social marginalization. The social illegibility of their actions severs eccentric forms of religious expression from the dire material conditions that cultivate them. Addressing the rechanneling of these destitute characters' experiences into incoherent religious actions, Frederick J. Hoffman argues that absurdity and violence are the only viable religious expressions that are capable of breaking through the spiritual malaise of O'Connor's fictional modern world. He writes, "In the semi-comic ooze of what one of

the shyster preachers calls ‘Soulsease,’ only the absurd and the violent will have effect” (40). Discussing O’Connor’s representation of the “Bible Belt,” Louis D. Rubin, Jr. similarly observes the rechanneling of religious enthusiasm away from acts of charity and into grotesque acts of violence: “Without love,” he writes, “the needs of the soul are capable of being met only by wrath and violence,” and “[i]n a world in which ‘faith supported by love’ cannot survive the attack of secular materialism, only faith achieved through hatred is possible” (64-5). But Rubin never satisfactorily elaborates on how “secular materialism” limits religiously motivated behavior to the grotesque and violent while simultaneously inhibiting love and charity as a religious option. He only points to the futility of secular characters like Raybur who attempt to “rescue” and enlighten fanatic characters through cold logic and reason. Thus, in his analysis of *The Violent Bear it Away*, Rubin suggests that the *better* “remedy for fanatical terror and wrath” is “not the denial of emotion in favor of cold behavioristic rationalism, but the equally emotional fanaticism of love” (64). What really curtails love as a religious option for fanatics in O’Connor’s fiction, however, is precisely the cultural narrative of the Bible Belt that has fused Southern evangelicalism to other Southern cultural norms and values that perpetuate hatred and violence. Rubin too readily accepts the myth that pits Southern religiosity against Northern rationalism, and this prevents him from drawing conclusions that might destabilize, rather than uphold, the generally accepted cultural narrative of the Bible Belt—a narrative maintained both by the false cultural nostalgia for a romanticized Southern religious heritage and by the fetishized spectacle of Southern eccentricity. By depicting religion in grotesque and overdetermined detail, O’Connor exaggerates the coerced marriage between religion and culture to the point where the presumed affinity

seems more contrived than it does natural. This also reveals the supposed opposition between Southern religion and national secular materialism to be a false dichotomy.

In her fiction, O'Connor often tries to "penetrate" a culturally inherited individualism in order to reveal a religiously inherited, and "natively" Eucharistic, sense of communality. In order to accomplish this, she frequently explores the unseen affinities between her sacramental Catholicism and the eccentric image of backwoods religion. "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" provides a striking example. In this short story, a twelve-year-old girl, always referred to as "the child" by the narrator, must endure a whole weekend with her insufferable cousins who are visiting from the convent where they live. Two years older than the child, the cousins are boy crazy, which bewilders the precocious prepubescent who "was glad to think that they were only second cousins and she couldn't have inherited any of their stupidity" (197). The cousins call themselves Temple One and Temple Two, in jest of the nuns at the convent who encourage them to be prudent and modest around boys because their bodies are God's temples. To keep the cousins, and herself, entertained, the child persuades her mother to invite the Wilkinsons boys, "farm boys" who "were both going to be Church of God preachers" (200), to keep the cousins entertained.

A brief explanation of this denominational reference can help elucidate O'Connor's use of "backwoods" religion in this and other stories. The Church of God refers to various fringe denominations that grew out of the Pentecostal Holiness movement in the early twentieth century. In his biography of A. J. Tomlinson, one of the founders of the Church of God in Tennessee, R. G. Robins discusses the radical nature of the holiness movement. Radical holiness, he writes, "[t]hough muted by the racism of its

day,...also reaffirmed one of the precepts of early evangelicalism: that black and white partake of one communion and, so, are one body.” In this way, he adds, the movement “inherit[ed] the multiracial ideal of early evangelicalism, complete with its innate tensions and ambiguities.” And while these new denominations were susceptible to the prejudices of the region at large, they nevertheless “established criteria that reassigned status on religious or ethical, as opposed to social or material, grounds.” This countercultural criteria of classifying individuals based on their spiritual—rather than social, economic, or racial—standing, “when combined with plainfolk idioms like the rhetoric of humility and the logic of divine reversal...fostered a paradoxical theology according to which God preferred to work in unexpected places and through those of small repute. Put another way, radical holiness cradled a nascent theology of the poor” (54-55). Thus, O’Connor mentioning of the Church of God aligns the Wilkinsons boys in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” with fringe sects whose marginality make possible, if not always probable, a communion of lower-class believers—those of “small repute”—across racial lines, a religiously cultivated form of class consciousness that undercuts the idea of a socially disengaged Southern religion.

The child fully expects the interaction of these simple-minded Protestant boys with her shallow Catholic cousins to prove humorous, and while the effect is certainly comedic, the crafty child gradually becomes aware that she remains somehow excluded—that the four older adolescents, despite their intellectual inferiority, know something that she does not. That night the cousins and Wilkinsons go to a fair. While the child wants to go, she refuses to go with them. From her bedroom window, she sees a search light, described as “a beacon of light from the fair.” “She could hear the distant

sound of the calliope,” the narrator reports, “and she saw in her head all the tents raised up in a kind of gold sawdust light.” Intensifying her sense of forbidden knowledge, the child recalls a previous trip to the fair, where “there was a special afternoon for school children and a special night for niggers” (203). The troubling juxtaposition, of course, infantilizes the black community. The implication that black citizens were in need of protection in the same manner as school children captures a lingering paternalistic attitude toward the black community on the part of Southern whites. In this way, the child and the black community are similarly excluded from the activities of “grown up” whites.

At the same time, however, another parallel develops between the child, who mistakenly feels superior to backwoods religious eccentrics, and the paternalist white community that similarly feels superior to the childlike black community. The child’s inevitable revelation that she is, in fact, not superior to the Wilkinenes, thus, by extension, reflects the false sense of superiority of the dominant white paternalists. In this triangulation—innocent children likened to infantilized blacks, the prideful child likened to hypocritical paternalists, and “inferior” blacks likened to disenfranchised backwoods fanatics—all cultural distances are momentarily collapsed, so that the possibility, if not the probability, of communion threatens to rupture culturally and socially imposed barriers.

During the afternoon for school children, the child reflects, “[c]ertain tents were closed...because they contained things that would be known only to grown people” (203). The child obsesses over the fact that her cousins and the farm boys might have access to this hidden knowledge. That night, she prays, “Lord, Lord, thank You that I’m not in the Church of God” (205). When the cousins return, the child learns that they had

snuck into one of the closed tents, and she demands that they tell her what they saw.

Finally, they explain that it was a “freak” that “was a man and woman both”:

It had been a freak with a particular name but they couldn't remember the name. The tent where it was had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women, but everyone could hear. The girls heard the freak say to the men, 'I'm going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way.' The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low, just flat... Then there was a long silence on the other side of the tent and finally the freak left the men and came over onto the women's side and said the same thing. (206)

In her ignorance and innocence, the child can only imagine a person to be both man and woman if it has two heads. Lying in bed trying to wrap her head around this “riddle,” she is unable to picture the hermaphrodite, so she pictures the audience instead:

She was better able to picture the faces of the country people watching, the men more solemn than they were in church, and the women stern and polite, with painted-looking eyes, standing as if they were waiting for the first note of the piano to begin the hymn. She could hear the freak saying, “God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit,” and the people saying, “Amen. Amen.” (207).

That the child relates the sideshow to a backwoods church service reinforces its association with the farm boys and the Church of God. Imaginatively reconstructing the scene described by her cousins, the child sees both the men and the women, even though they cannot see one another through the black curtain. Thus, the spectators become the spectacles as the child witnesses the scenes through the hermaphrodite's eyes. She takes on this perspective not because she consciously identifies with the freak, but precisely because she is unable to conceive of an individual who is both a man and a woman. In other words, the point of view of someone who is utterly unrecognizable and mysterious is easier to imagine, because the country people in the audience are relatively familiar. She is “better able to picture them,” because they are easily reduced to stereotypes.

After the child and her mother return the cousins to the convent, they attend Mass at the chapel, and the child feels the presence of God and prays for forgiveness, “but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it.” On the car ride home, the driver tells them that the fair had been closed early: “Some of the preachers from town gone out and inspected it and got the police to shut it down,” he says (209). The story associates rural fringe religions like the Church of God with the hermaphrodite sideshow, a conflation of tent revivals and circus tents as sites where those gathered momentarily transcend social barriers of race, class, and gender. But the more reputable “preachers from town” have the fair shut down, which signifies a more culturally centric religion policing social boundaries, borders, and margins in order to contain the nascent threat of prophetic revelation.

The central character of O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, in many ways reenacts the cultural narratives with which I'm concerned. Just as the Bible Belt represents a conceptual geography and history that centralize what had once been a marginal religious movement, Haze comes from a family whose religiosity is less representative of the culture at large than it is antagonistic toward it. The narrator explains how Haze's grandfather “had been a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger” (9-10). This evangelist is described in terms of aggression that figure him as an outsider and misfit like so many of O'Connor famous characters. Although Haze at first resists his “calling” to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, he carries with him the same contentious disposition and reluctantly becomes an evangelist in the modern Southern city of

Taulkinham, where he preaching in the streets from the hood of his car. Haze's compulsory evangelism reinforces the over-determined idea of the Bible Belt by suggesting that he is powerless to resist being formed in a predefined fundamentalist mold; however, the way in which the novel reenacts this cultural narrative's ability to trump individual volitions reveals and subverts the cultural narrative in which Haze is contained. From the outset Haze, whom O'Connor described as an unwitting Christian, fights against familiar trope he is destined to fulfill, but in the end his grandfather's prophetic words that "Jesus would have him in the end!" come true (11).

The novel opens with a description of Haze wearing a hat "that an elderly country preacher would wear" (1), and he is on multiple occasions mistaken for a preacher, so that he feels compelled to assure everyone he meets that he is, in fact, not a preacher and that he does not believe in anything. Having recently returned from fighting in Europe during World War II, Haze discovers that his small family house and his entire hometown of Eastrod have been abandoned. Now rootless and displaced, Haze travels by train with no real sense of direction and purpose except, ironically, to prove that he has no predetermined purpose or fate. When asked by a fellow train passenger about his destination, Haze answers, "Going to Taulkinham....Don't know nobody there, but I'm going to do some things. I'm going to do some things I never have done before" (5). Thus, Haze makes a declaration of free will and sets out on his journey of self-determination. But time and time again his efforts to escape his own prescribed narrative are frustrated.

When he reaches the Atlanta-like metropolis of Taulkinham, he takes a taxi to a brothel after reading about "the friendliest bed in town" in a bathroom stall at the station,

his purpose being to deny the reality of sin by committing fornication (16). But despite this sinful destination, the cab driver still mistakes Haze for a preacher. “It ain’t only the hat,” he tells Haze; “It’s a look in your face somewheres” (16) To be sure, O’Connor’s portrayal of Haze’s inability to escape God’s calling can be read as an earnest statement about God’s relentless and undeniable grace, and the often harrowing confrontation therewith. If we reconsider the figure of the Christian *malgré lui* in terms of O’Connor’s strategy of building upon a misunderstood acceptance of grotesque “religious enthusiasm” in the South, however, then the cabbie’s misrecognition of Haze as a preacher says less about Mote’s spiritual calling than it does the culturally-defined destiny he futilely tries to escape.

In Taulkinham, Haze encounters Asa Hawks, a supposedly blind preacher, and his daughter, Sabbath, both of whom pass out religious tracks on street corners while begging for money. Later, Haze learns that Hawks is not really blind; he had tried to blind himself as a public demonstration at a tent revival by rubbing lye in his eyes, but he lost his nerve at the last minute. Because Haze, like Sally in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” is repulsed by such inauthenticity, his discovery of Hawks’ apostasy sets him on a path toward fulfilling the ascetic and penitential act of self-mutilation of which Hawks was incapable. Prior to this revelation, however, Haze is captivated by Hawks. Before he realizes that Hawks is not really blind, Haze think that Hawks possesses the same prophetic vision as Haze’s grandfather who had prophesized that he would never escape Jesus. This compels Haze to persuade Hawks, above all, of his free will to renounce his calling to be a preacher. Thus, ironically, Haze begins to preach his blasphemously nihilistic message in direct defiance of Hawks’ evangelical message. He declares his

church to be the “Church Without Christ,” (31, 59) and he preaches his anti-gospel—that there’s no truth—from the hood of a used car, which he has bought as yet another declaration of his freedom and mobility. Of course, his portable pulpit and his prophetic antagonism only make him resemble an itinerant preacher like his waspish grandfather even more.

While the concept of the Bible Belt makes the spectacle of religiosity central, religious fanaticism, by definition, is nonconformist; thus *Wise Blood*, like *Light in August*, depicts its religious characters in contrast to a more docile community that shuns religious enthusiasm. In *Light in August*, that community is itself represented by mainstream Protestant churches in which aberrational displays of religious fervor are characterized as intrusions into safe Protestant spaces. But in the urban world of *Wise Blood*, the safe Protestant space has lost even the structure of a religious sanctuary, so that the normative scenes into which characters like Haze and Asa Hawks intrude are the open spaces of commerce. Against this backdrop, O’Connor’s preachers momentarily become foreign and threatening, just as the image of the Gospel as a hidden stinger used in O’Connor’s description of Haze’s grandfather clearly represents his sort of itinerant evangelicalism as a latent threat. In the subsequent Cold War context, that potential duplicity is even more subversive than it would have been in decades prior. Indeed, these evangelists are described as “Goddam Communist foreigners!” (21).

This characterization of preachers as foreign and intrusive enemies is compounded when the narrator tells us that Haze believes that the surgeons who operated on him when he was injured in World War II never removed the shrapnel. Just as his grandfather carried Jesus around in his head like a stinger, Haze literally carries enemy

munitions inside his body. Jon Lance Bacon argues that, in O'Connor's fiction, Protestants that have in some way been "disinherited" come together to reject the conflation of American capitalist culture and mainline Christianity, a marriage that ran parallel during the Cold War to the linking of atheism with Communism. These groups, unlike mainline American Christians, refused to allow their religions to be subsumed by a generic "American way of life." In this way, O'Connor saw common ground between her own Catholicism and the religious misfits she wrote about. As Bacon writes: "[R]eligious rhetoric that carried a message of 'rejection' was politically suspect. [...] [W]ith only two political alternatives, any form of dissent from the ideology of capitalism seemed to promote the opposite ideology, Communism" (63). To a much greater extent than the South of the 1930s that Faulkner wrote about, the post-WWII South became hyper-nationalist and patriotic. Thus, whereas the religious South of the first half of the twentieth century was often conceived in contrast to national secularism—sometimes pejoratively, sometimes laudably—the postwar South's presumed religiosity was construed as an ultra-American contrast to irreligious Communism. But this construal required a strategic alliance between religious and capitalist values that strayed from the anti-industrialist, agrarian values with which prewar Southern religion was frequently aligned. The South's primary "enemy" was no longer the atheistic North as it had been during Reconstruction and for decades after; it was the atheistic enemies of American democracy. Thus, while a lingering rejection or distrust of American values among religious eccentrics, according to Bacon, made them "politically suspect," the notion of a specifically religious form of political dissidence was largely illegible in a country that could not separate religious virtue from national values. In this way, the kind of

enthusiasm that might be construed as being “politically suspect” often becomes a cultural curiosity.

While the narrator blatantly codes O'Connor's religious characters as threatening and subversive in a Cold War America so obsessed with conformity and normativity, the fact that the novel itself is seldom regarded as subversive says something about the imagined South—and in particular, the imagined Bible Belt—as a space of containment, a designated zone where the specter of religious enthusiasm poses no real threat to the dominant social order of either the South or the nation. Southern abnormality does not violate American normativity; rather, it is a product to be consumed. In O'Connor's America, even extreme religiosity was preferable to the threat of atheism and Communism.<sup>27</sup> In the bivalent terms of theistic democracy and atheistic communism, Southern fundamentalism fell safely in the class of non-threatening ideology. That O'Connor's prophet figures ultimately conform to a narrative of the Bible Belt that domesticates their “foreignness” parodies how Cold War consumer culture dictates that Southern eccentrics cannot be agents of social or religious subversion or activism. Nevertheless, O'Connor seems determined to extricate what containment culture had rendered inextricable by divesting religion from this ideological and cultural amalgamation and repositioning it as something beneath, outside, or at least on the edge of culture.

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<sup>27</sup> In his analysis of the recurring narratives of containment in post-WWII American culture, Nadel writes, “The story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means” (*Containment Culture* 3).

Despite Haze's rejection of everything inauthentic, and despite his menacing *appearance* as a foreign threat, his "rejection" of consumer culture at this point in the novel is, like that of Sally Sash, largely superficial. Whether Haze is a more authentic prophet figure than Hawks remains questionable. Both Haze and Hawks may speak in the menacing and militant tone of fundamentalists, but their message, notes Bacon, "hardly matters." But rather than "calling people away from consumerism," as Bacon seems to suggest, they become exotic commodities. Their sideshow militancy and dissidence is, in that way, rendered unthreatening, one display among many for window shoppers to view. When Hawks interrupts a street vendor's sales pitch, he appears as an intruder into the marketplace. But he does not exactly play the role of Jesus overturning tables outside the temple. Rather, being keenly aware of the consumer's aversion to preachers who challenge the status quo, Hawks turns their distaste for religious dissent into a commodity. What he is truly selling, then, is his own silence: "Help a blind preacher," he tells them; "If you won't repent, give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Help a blind unemployed preacher. Wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach? Come on and give a nickel if you won't repent" (21). Rather than calling his hearers to repent, he is giving them, as consumers, a choice to purchase absolution, not from their sins but from having to hear about their sins. As his name suggests, he is hawking religion just like the vendor is pedaling potato peelers. Furthermore, to ensure his compliance with, rather than rejection of, the virtues of consumer culture, he explains that he can spend their nickel just "as good as" they can. In other words, he is one of them.

Nevertheless, the commodity of withheld judgment, while supplying a consumer demand, remains threatening and subversive in appearance—and in the culture of

containment, as Alan Nadel has shown, even the *appearance* of acting subversive can be incriminating, especially when combined with the testimony of others. When the competing vendor describes these “damn Jesus fanatics” as “goddam Communist foreigners!” he temporarily challenges Hawks’ attempt to establish a symbiotic relationship between his empty asceticism and the American way of life. That Hawks’ avowed acceptance of consumer culture can be perceived as a threat because of his eccentric appearance provides a fleeting glimpse at the latent foreignness and countercultural potential of religion. The more lasting impression that O’Connor emphasizes, however, is the unsustainability of a countercultural Southern religion. Even at the beginning of a cold war culture of surveillance, the spectacularity of these street prophets neutralizes any nascent threat to social order. In that way, they become an analogue to O’Connor herself, whose own defiant grotesquerie can be read as subverting normative values. O’Connor often likens artists to prophets and to the “prophet-heroes” she depicts in her fiction:

They seem to carry an invisible burden and to fix us with eyes that remind us that we all bear some heavy responsibility whose nature we have forgotten. They are prophetic figures. In the novelist’s case prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, distances in the qualitative sense, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the modern instances of the grotesque. But to the eye of the general reader, these prophet-heroes are freaks. The public invariably approaches them from the standpoint of abnormal psychology. (860)

On the one hand, O’Connor acknowledges the potential ineffectiveness of grotesque images that are consumed as “authentic” representations. She characterizes the “general reader” as a sort of consumer tourist who easily mistakes a clichéd trope as genuine. On the other hand, she does not dismiss the prophet-hero and the novelist’s recessive subversion. The “standpoint of abnormal psychology” discounts the prophet’s

competence and ability to pass coherent judgment on the “general” readers who commodify the freak without comprehending their own deformities. As a prophet-novelist, O’Connor tries to see beyond the commodified spectacle of religious enthusiasm to the “human aspiration” beneath it. Elsewhere, she similarly notes that “it’s well to remember that the serious writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene. For him, the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima affects life on the Oconee River, and there’s not anything he can do about it” (*MM* 77). While O’Connor’s mystical vision of seeing distant things and events in close proximity may seem innocuous, the precise analogy she chose to illustrate this point conveys immense significance regarding the context in which she was writing. In the early days of the atomic age and the Cold War, to “see in” Georgia the scorched Earth of enemy soil was a deceptively bold statement.

In her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” O’Connor further emboldens the prophet-author’s subversive nature by defining advertisements in terms antithetical to revelatory art:

Unless we are willing to accept our artists for who they are, the answer to the question, ‘Who speaks for America today?’ will have to be: the advertising agencies. They are entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society, and no one has ever accused them of not being affirmative. Where the artist is still trusted, he will not be looked to for assurance. Those who believe that art proceeds from a healthy, and not from a diseased, faculty of mind will take what he shows them as a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances; that is, as a limited revelation but a revelation nevertheless. (806)

The prophetic voice, O’Connor suggests, is bad for business. It goes against the consumer demand for constant affirmation. In this light, Asa Hawks is a false prophet. His religion is in competition with the other street vendors only because he participates in the

sanctioned antagonism of the free market. That he can spend a nickel as well as the rest of them, therefore, implies a once-prophetic religion whose antagonism, instead of unreassuringly revealing the shortcomings of consumer society, is absorbed into a free market economy that forecloses the possibility of revelation.

Haze's contentious disposition and his often violent search for an authentic self seem to set his prophetic faculty apart from that of Hawks; however, neither is Haze's religion an explicit rejection of consumer culture. Haze's core message is that "there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth." As Jonathan D. Fitzgerald writes, this is a message that "would probably resonate with the people of the city if they cared to listen, but the notion that religion should be private will not even let them hear it" (31). For both Hawks and Haze, it is just as much the form of their message as it is the content or what they say that makes them appear threatening and foreign. Ultimately, it is the form of religious enthusiasm and not their messages that unite Hawks and Haze as "disinherited" and subversive Protestants. While they appear foreign in relation to the broader community, however, their protests are ultimately extensions of the consumer demands to which they must conform (or which they must perform). In the sense that they fulfill the expected image of the Southern fanatic, therefore, Haze and Hawks are, like Doc Hines in *Light in August*, unwitting representatives of the community from which they are excluded, incapable of meaningful protest. And in the same way that Doc Hines preaches a message of white supremacy despite his veritable exclusion from the white community, Haze and Hawks preach messages that reinforce consumer cultural values despite their essential out-of-placeness as would be prophetic figures. Moreover, because of their own

sense of centrality—because they refuse to recognize themselves as outsiders—the true objects of their antagonism and the motivation of their dissent are either elusive or somehow diverted and misdirected.

Only two people in Taulkinham respond to Haze's preaching. The first, Hoover Shoats, seeing an opportunity to swindle potential followers, wants to be Haze's business manager by marketing Haze as "the Prophet" to half-curious onlookers (87). When Haze refuses to go along with the scheme, the rejected Shoats finds a look alike, Solace Layfield, to play the prophet. For the next couple of days, Haze and his double must vie for the people's attention. Appalled once again by the inauthenticity of this intruder, Haze runs Layfield down with his car, thereby eliminating this false version of himself. In that way, murdering Layfield becomes yet another step in Haze's futile project of self-determination.<sup>28</sup>

The other character who responds to Haze amidst the crowds of complacent citizens is Enoch Emory. Enoch, a teenager, is also a recent arrival to the inhospitable and indifferent city of Taulkinham, and the lonesome boy immediately tries to befriend the newcomer. When Haze preaches that the Church Without Christ "needs a new jesus...one that's all man, without blood to waste, and that don't look like any other man" (80), Enoch takes Haze literally, like a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. He sneaks into the local museum and steals a mummified body that has no blood, that looks like no other man, and whose self-evident mortality makes him clearly "all man." When

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Schiebe aligns Haze's impulse to kill Layfield with O'Connor's critique of the "Emersonian myth of freedom" and self-determination (408). The transcendentalist narrative requires the "rescuing of the authentic self by the killing of a false double" (415). But the "final emphasis of the novel lies not in a continued struggle to create oneself in one's own image by destroying all false replicas, but rather in Hazel's resignation of self to a higher power" that "he is not meant to comprehend in this life" (422).

Enoch drops the mummy off at Haze's apartment, Haze, disgusted by the object, throws it against the wall so that the "head popped and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust" (106). What seems to disgust Haze most is Enoch's thoughtless acceptance and submissiveness, which undermines Haze's intention not to convert listeners but, conversely, to liberate them from their dependence on received ideas and convictions, precisely what he wants but can never achieve for himself. Rather than being satisfied that someone has heeded his word, Haze is repulsed by Enoch's lack of volition, and this profoundly agitates Haze, who fears that he, like Enoch, might also be incapable of self-determination. Ironically, by over-literalizing Haze's sermon, Enoch is unable to fulfill the call to self-determination, which one cannot accomplish by following instructions or by ritualistically adhering to someone else's dogma, no matter how obscure that dogma might be. Thus, when Enoch delivers the precise and literal embodiment of the "new Jesus" Haze had asked for, it reminds him of his own inability to escape his predetermined path.

Enoch's mummy also critiques the notion that the South has preserved a distinctively primitive and unchanged religious heritage. That the "new Jesus" is paradoxically ancient draws attention to the South's modern primitivism—how the South, in reaction to destabilizing historical forces, projects a counter vision of a stable and distinct Southern tradition that is just as much a product of modernity as it is an exception to it. The mummy resides in a small museum at the center of town, part of the zoo where Enoch works. When Enoch talks about the mummy and the museum, however, he represents it as a secret, hidden place that he must sneak into, when in fact it is open to the public, accentuated by the mother and her children who come straight from the public

pool to see the “secret” mummy. This zoo, an artificial wilderness that has displaced a real wilderness, parodies the primitive aesthetic and exhibitionism that Southerners and non-Southerners had come to expect from representations of the South. But the public exhibition satirizes such primitivism as being inauthentic and rooted in consumer culture.

At last, Haze tries in vain to leave the city, but he gets pulled over by a police officer. After learning that Haze is driving without a license, the patrolman pushes the car down a hill. Haze realizes that he is trapped in Taulkinham, caught between consumer culture’s call to be a religious spectacle and Haze’s grandfather’s call to prophecy with a hidden stinger. Haze moves into a new apartment. To his new landlady’s bewilderment, he begins observing bizarre rituals of self-mutilation. First, he blinds himself with lye, inspired by the act that the faithless Hawks never had the nerve to finish. He then wraps barbed wire around his chest. He takes long walks with rocks in his shoes, until one day he collapses near a drainage ditch. Two officers find him and put him in the back of their car, but he dies before they make it back to his apartment.

Many critics read Haze as finding redemption in the end. Hoffman, for instance, argues that Haze’s path to redemption follows a clear, three-stage journey that begins with “the recognition of death,” followed by “rebellion against grace,” and ending with “self-immolation, or the individual move toward redemption.” In a more recent example, W. A. Sessions argues that Haze’s demise brings about redemption through the surrogate character of his landlady, Mrs. Flood: “the hero as central character does disappear, in fact, into the responses to him by the new central consciousness, Mrs. Flood. At the end of the novel, moral education is now the prerogative of Mrs. Flood, a witness and survivor, like Noah, of an event she considers a redemptive disaster” (247). O’Connor’s

own reflections about her fiction corroborate such readings: “There is something in us, as story tellers and as listeners to stories that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored” (863). Indeed, that Haze should find redemption seems almost inevitable given the way that O'Connor sets up a narrative-driving tension between Haze's conflicting senses of fate and free will. As Lewis Macleod writes, Haze's words often suggest a “kind of suppressed longing for the very thing he repudiates” (262). But while some have rightly read Haze's inevitable gravitation toward the very religious life he tries to escape as O'Connor's vision of an inescapable confrontation with God's grace, O'Connor, in depicting Haze's apparent lack of volition, also parodies the prescriptive cultural narrative of the Bible Belt that strips Southern religion of its prophetic vision. By committing penitential acts of self-mutilation in the privacy of his apartment, and not as a commodified performance of religious eccentricity, Haze does arguably elude the grasp of consumer culture; however, the retreat to a domestic space of a prophetic revelation meant for public reproach only affirms the power of consumer culture to contain the threat of religion to the status quo. Perhaps the fact that the landlady Mrs. Flood bears witness to Haze's retreat echoes O'Connor's idea of “a limited revelation,” but the more apt revelation of the novel comes in its parodic illustration of how consumers read Southern religion like they do advertisements: as affirmations of what they already believe or want to believe—whether it creates an imaginative distance that affirms one's sense of normality or it provides a “blessed assurance” in an easy redemption that comes without reproach or penitence.

In *Wise Blood*, the tent revival becomes a circus-like spectacle rather than a place of spiritual renewal. In fact, the Hawk's widely advertised tent revival mirrors the circus

Haze attends as a child, when he sneaks into a sideshow tent where a naked woman is writhing in a coffin while a crowd of men, including Haze's father, look on. When Haze returns home, his mother sees a change in him and asks him what he has seen. This confrontation resembles the passage in Genesis in which Adam and Eve, having been made aware of their own nakedness, are confronted by God, who asks them why their bodies are covered and how they learned of their own nakedness. The allusion suggests that Haze has experienced a similar revelation of his own vulnerability, and that his mother recognizes the effect of his having seen a grotesque version of his father that shatters his illusion of a normal family and community. This remembered circus tent comes to parallel Hawk's later tent revival. We learn about Hawks' earlier career as a tent revivalist when Haze reads a newspaper clipping that explains how Hawks got the scars that mark his face: "EVANGELIST PROMISES TO BLIND SELF," the headline reads. The article explains that "Hawks, an evangelist of the Free Church of Christ, has promised to blind himself to justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him" (63-64). Two hundred people come to witness Hawks' advertised self-blinding, as if such extreme spectacles of religious fanaticism had become acceptable in the confines of designated spaces, not unlike a circus, a place where the bizarre and the irrational become intelligible to consumers. Of course, the follow-up headline reads, "EVANGELIST'S NERVE FAILS" (65). The spectacle of redemption and the legitimized consumption of an exoticized revivalism proves futile in its ability to redeem the consumer culture. But neither is Haze's eventual fulfillment of Hawks' inept asceticism, when he blinds himself with lye in the final chapter, a clear picture of redemption, as it has often been interpreted. Haze may have shunned the outward form of religious spectacle through the

private “resignation of self to a higher power” (Schiebe 422), but he has still retreated from the community that needs saving. His personal salvation fails to engage with and challenge the community in the way of “prophets and poets”—that is, unless we accept that his “fanaticism is a reproach, [and] not merely an eccentricity” (817). While the novel clearly illustrates the limits of prophecy as a form of cultural reproach in the increasingly commodified South of the mid-twentieth century, O’Connor uses parody to reproach a religion that has lost its prophetic nerve and to point beyond the conventional *image* of the Bible Belt toward a less culturally captive form of Southern religion that is truly foreign and potentially dissident.

O’Connor’s persistent focus on religious fanaticism in the Christ-Haunted South reveals her concern that religion, in the postwar context of rampant consumerism, was becoming increasingly irrelevant to people’s lives. While many read this as a reaction to the secularism that O’Connor perceived as gaining ground in the region, my readings suggest that what she was more likely responding to was the increasing inefficacy of religion itself. It would be odd, after all, to exaggerate the threat of secularism at a time when the nation, no less than the South, was becoming *more* religious, at least on the surface of a Cold War culture that brandished religion as a gauge of democratic allegiance. In this context, religion becomes a commodity for personal consumption and not a means of communion. What troubled O’Connor, then, was the conflation of national, regional, and religious values that rendered religion less capable of fulfilling a distinct prophetic purpose. The urge to resituate religion in the social margins where it might revive some latent impulse to defy, rather than comply with, cultural conventions, aligns O’Connor’s work with that of other authors I consider, who each problematize

nostalgic images of a centrally rooted Southern religion. To accuse O'Connor of uncritically ratifying such nostalgia is to miss the parodic dimensions of her fictionalized Bible Belt.

## Chapter Five

### “Congo gods talking in Alabama”: Bad Memory, Unauthorized Histories, and the (Un)Making of Southern Religion in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston

This study so far has been about the faulty memory of the South’s religious past. Like Faulkner and O’Connor, Zora Neale Hurston makes religion central to her fictional characters and communities while simultaneously undercutting the illusion of continuity and stability between a Southern religious past and present. The cultural narrative of the Bible Belt, I have argued, by instilling nostalgia for a threatened way of life, tries to reinvent Southern religion in such a way that self-authorizes the present, creating a strong tie to a revered Old-Time religion. Of course, such nostalgia posed a problem for black Christians in the Bible Belt: while they shared a religious heritage intertwined with that of their white counterparts, there was much less in Southern history for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century descendants of slaves to recall longingly. That such a nostalgia posed a problem for blacks in the emergent Bible Belt is not to say that they had less of a claim on the South or its religion. As W.E.B. DuBois suggests in his discussion of the “Negro Church,” exiled and radicalized blacks in the North often felt “[d]riven from [their] birthright in the South by a situation at which every fibre of his more outspoken and assertive nature revolts” (138).<sup>29</sup> According to DuBois, following Reconstruction many Southern whites regretfully “mourn[ed] the loss of the old-time Negro, the frank, honest, simple, old servant who stood for the *earlier religious age* of submission and humility [emphasis added]” (137). But this mythic image, as a coded

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<sup>29</sup> My point, then, is that the dominant cultural nostalgia of the Bible Belt South worked to repress such “outspoken” claims on what MLK, Jr. would later refer to as his “beloved Southland”: King writes, “Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue” (1898).

expression of the white fear of black individuals' freedom, could scarcely serve the interests of the black community moving forward.

As do *Light in August* and *Wise Blood*, Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), and her penultimate novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), represent the Church as a site of tension between conflicting narratives and images. In *Jonah*, Hurston explodes the Bible Belt image of the subservient and selfless black man by depicting a humanized and flawed preacher named John Pearson, whose brilliance as an orator enables him to preach his way to the top of his community, despite his philandering ways. As an adolescent, John runs away from his abusive stepfather, a tenant farmer. He finds work at the former plantation of Alf Pearson, his white biological father. There, John attends school for the first time and meets his future wife, Lucy Potts. While he loves Lucy above all others, John remains a perpetual womanizer. As a result of his lifestyle, John gets in trouble with the law and must abandon his family to avoid being sent to the chain gang or being lynched. He lands in Eatonville, Florida, where he discovers that he has a natural gift for preaching. After saving some money working as a carpenter, John sends for Lucy and their children to join him. Soon after they arrive, John is ordained as a preacher and begins his successful ministry in nearby Sanford. Extremely popular in the community, John is unable to shake his old ways and remains unfaithful to Lucy. Lucy becomes increasingly feeble, and after her death, John's hasty remarriage and public divorce trial cause his congregation to turn on him. The defrocked minister leaves town to start over again, working as a carpenter in Plant City. He marries Sally, a financially independent widow who buys him a Cadillac and talks him into visiting his old friends in Sanford. Back in Sanford, he is seduced by a younger woman. On his drive

back to Plant City, John is struck and killed by a train. Throughout the novel, the tension between the saintly “Uncle Tom” image and what John, in acknowledging his weaknesses, refers to as “uh natchel man,” becomes a central conflict in Hurston’s treatment of the black prophet figure. When his congregation is ready to oust their womanizing preacher, John temporarily wins them back over with a persuasive sermon.

In Romans 7, Apostle Paul writes, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh....Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me....with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin” (*NSRV* 7:18-20; 25). Thus, in familiar theological terms that echo Paul’s conflicted reflections on the ostensible dichotomy of spirit and flesh, John’s words capture the either-or cultural image of the black man as either sinner or saint: “When Ah speak tuh yuh from dis pulpit, dat ain’t me talkin’, dat’s de voice uh God speakin’ thru me. When de voice is thew, Ah jus’ uhnother one uh God’s crumblin’ clods” (122). John retains his own religious authority by drawing attention to the transformative power of the pulpit to disembody the ordained voice from the natural man’s sinful body. After the sermon, the narrator reports, “strong hands were there to thrust them back” into his “throne-like seat” (123). Hurston’s satirical likening of the pulpit to a throne implicitly critiques religious authority as humanly rather than divinely sanctioned. In Hurston’s representation, the power structure of the Church is somehow detrimental, or at least oppositional, to the wholeness of the man who is both-and, not either-or, spiritual and natural. According to Ernest Kurtz, the problem of dichotomizing religious experience into the black and white terms of total victory or total defeat is especially prevalent in white Southern churches. In his essay “The Tragedy of Southern

Religion,” Kurtz writes, “The deepest anomaly of southern white religion...lay in its strange blindness to tragedy—in the failure of its churches to discern the nature and meaning of the tragic dimension in human experience,” despite the fact that “Southern life, uniquely in American historical experience, knew the raw materials of tragedy—from the tribulations inherent in its ‘peculiar institution, to the calamity of defeat in war, to the adversities engendered by its long endemic poverty” (217). Kurtz argues that the emotional experience of conversion so central to evangelical revivalism eventually transformed, especially in white churches, into a kind of triumphalism that made many Southerners oblivious to their own tragic experiences. Evangelicals, he observes, tend to reduce life to the either-or categories of saved or unsaved. “Because southern churches embodied an ‘either-or’ theology,” he writes, “southern religion contributed to blinding its adherents to the both-and-ness of the human situation rather than enabling them to understand it and aiding them in confronting it” (222). In *Jonah*, Hurston illustrates the potential threat to black communities and congregations that replicate a bivalent theology incapable of comprehending and responding to ambivalent experience.

In this chapter, I want to suggest that Hurston sees the disruptions and discontinuities in narratives of the South’s religious past as opportunities to recover and recreate stories that challenge and complicate, rather than authenticate and accommodate, the religious and racial terms stipulated by Bible Belt nostalgia. Because her fiction refuses to conform to the authorized “religious age of submission,” conventional religious spaces like the pulpit become sites of contested and contestable authority. But more than constructing subversive narratives that simply counteract the safe and stable image of the Bible Belt, Hurston explores the terms of authorship and authority themselves, the very

notion of canonicity. In doing so, she shows how cultural production is always the result of disruptive cultural convergence, even when the hybrid means of production precipitate the canonical ordering of *History*. The term “cultural production,” in this sense, exceeds the definition implicit in “a top-down analysis of cultural production that privileges production as the determining influence on the ‘reception’ of meaning,” according to Michele Dillon. On the contrary, “the content of any symbolic production...is open to multiple interpretations and uses. These interpretations, moreover, can be quite autonomous of the ‘objective’ content inscribed at the official point of production. Interpretive activity,” she continues, “is thus an active, creative process that is socially, historically, and locally contextualized” (411). She adds that critics of cultural production like Bourdieu, by focusing on the top-down dissemination of meaning, have tended to neglect the recursive nature of cultural production, thus “underplay[ing] the relative autonomy and cultural agency of ordinary people” (412).

Like the authors considered in previous chapters, Hurston is drawn to religious outsiders. As I have argued, the recurrence of the religious outsider as a fictional staple in a region where religiosity is presumably marks one’s belonging, reveals an underlying tension between competing religious impulses—one leaning towards stabilization and conformity, the other toward destabilization and defiance. In her memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston personally identifies with the figure of the religious outsider when she distances herself from her father’s religion. Even though she “tumbled right into the Missionary Baptist Church when [she] was born,” she was a natural skeptic, always “questioning and seeking.” She had listened to her father “explain all about God’s habits, His heaven, His ways and means. Everything was known and settled” (266).

Hurston was intimately familiar with the brand of Protestantism practiced by her father and by so many others across the South. But her naturally critical and curious eye, she explains, set her apart from the fold. It is perhaps this sense of liminality, of being both in and out, that often leads Hurston to disrupt and unsettle what on the surface might be accepted as already “known and settled.” Later, in college, she describes studying the “great religions of the world.” It became obvious to her “that two men, both outsiders, had given my religion its chances of success.” First, Paul “not only formulated the religion, but exerted his brilliant mind to carry it to the most civilized nations of his time.” Second, “Constantine took up with force where Paul left off with persuasion” (276-7). She emphasizes these two founding fathers of Christianity as paradoxically being “outsiders”—Paul being a Pharisee and Constantine being “as pagan as he could lay in his hide” (275). By identifying with such outsiders—especially Paul, who uses rhetoric rather than violence—Hurston constructs an authorial persona that embodies the archetype of the religious outsider in Southern literature. In the previous chapters, I discussed the recurrent marginality of religious characters in Southern literature, and how this figure defies the fact that the religion was supposedly central to Southern culture. These outcasts are simultaneously defined by and excluded from the dominant religion.

Hurston explores the centric-eccentric dialectic of Southern religion in both her fiction and non-fiction. In Hurston’s view, the black Southern churches, like their white counterparts, were at once complicit in instilling community-stabilizing narratives of continuity while simultaneously threatening such narratives from within, due to the fact that Southern religion stemmed from a position of cultural eccentricity. By oxymoronically characterizing significant figures in Christian history as integral

outsiders, in almost the same breath that she paints herself as an integral outsider, Hurston provides a key to understanding of her mantra that the “Negro is not a Christian really” (“Characteristics” 1045). By emphasizing that Christianity is a religion of conversion, she undermines the fact that any form of Christianity can be more culturally “authentic” and pure than another. Christianity, she points out, bears the imprint of all cultures it appears to subsume, sometimes through persuasion and sometimes through violence. In the context of describing Paul as an outside founder of Christianity, Hurston explicitly reclaims her father’s religion, which she finally refers to as “my religion.” Like her fictional women Miriam and Lucy, whom I discuss at length below, Hurston attempts to challenge the rigid definitions of what both black and white Christians in the Bible Belt consider “settled and known,” and she replaces a familiar Southern religion with the more mutable and adaptable memory of folk religion.

Concepts like the Bible Belt depend on an unadulterated lineage emanating from a purer past, which valorizes something ostensibly under threat in the present. In her 1935 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston outright rejects the idea of authenticating origins. Discussing the concept of originality in Southern black culture, she writes, “It is obvious that to get back to original sources is much too difficult for *any* group to claim very much as a certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas...[T]he Negro,” she continues, “is a very original being, he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language...*and most certainly the religion* of his new country [emphasis added].” “Thus,” she concludes, “has arisen a new art in the civilized world, and thus has our so-called civilisation come” (1046-47). Hurston is less

concerned with lineages and traceable origins as defining, authenticating, or consolidating a racial identity than she is with originality as a means of cultural production: the practice of origination, of creatively redefining self in relation and reaction to others, a response to interpersonal and intercultural contact. Originality for Hurston thus lies at the heart of cultural production, which she suggests always results in the exchange and modification of ideas as they traverse cultural and racial categories. But if “so-called civilisation” depends on such cultural hybridity, then the hybrid means of production are somehow hidden in the canons of Western civilization whose history and authority often depend on at least the illusion of traceable, and traceably pure and intact, origins and lineages.

At first glance, these concerns over intercultural influence seem to reveal a latent anxiety about cultural authenticity. She is trying to persuade a largely white and presumably skeptical readership that “the Negro is a very original being” and not a poor imitator of white culture. According to Walter Benn Michaels, Hurston redefines originality in order to subvert the prejudicial notion that blacks had a propensity to mimic whites and were, in that regard, unoriginal and uncreative. By changing the connotation of originality from invention to innovation, Hurston could provocatively celebrate the fact that the “Negro” was a famous mimic. For Michaels, then, Hurston’s goal “is not to deny the qualities that have produced this fame but instead to undo the opposition between imitation and originality, which is to say that she is concerned to assert the Negro’s ability as a ‘mimic’ while defending him from charges that he lacks ‘originality’ and that he ‘imitates from a feeling of inferiority’” (87). To emphasize Hurston’s purpose in re-conceptualizing originality as an intellectual *defense* against a racial stereotype has

the strange (if unintended) effect of confirming the stereotype that she is indeed writing from a sense of inferiority. But for Michaels, the question of imaginative inferiority generates a problem for intellectuals like Hurston who try to define group expression in racial terms that lump the intellectual-artist into the same racial group as the folk culture that inspires their art. Drawing from Alain Locke's seemingly contradictory uses of "class differentiation" and "group expression" in his attempt to establish a "New Negro" identity, Michaels asks, "How could it no longer be right to regard the Negro 'en masse' at the very moment when 'a great race-welding' has finally made Negro 'group expression' possible?" In other words, how could artists like Hurston separate race from class so that the characteristics of folk expressions she describes were functions of race, which she had in common with those she wrote about, and not functions of class, which separated her from them? For the artist, then, "it is race, not class, that connects the African American intellectual to the culture that, disconnected by the intellectual from the 'folk,' is thereby reconnected to the race." Thus, Michaels argues, Hurston's dialect narratives are "nothing but the process of racialization, the enactment of the relation between narrator and narrated as a genealogy through which *an* autonomous racial identity is both authenticated and, through the process of authentication, created" (93-94). This is doubly "authenticating," since Hurston *performs* the folk art of mimicry in her mimetic representations of folk expression.

This process of creating a sense of group consciousness, however, is by no means peculiar to questions of racial identity. It is the same creative process that gives rise to a national or regional consciousness. As Benedict Anderson argues, national communities, like all communities save perhaps "primordial villages of face-to-face contact," are

imaginative constructs that consolidate among a diverse population a shared identity (6). That “the process of racialization” across class lines is a constructive endeavor does not necessarily contradict Hurston’s own understanding of cultural production. What Hurston reveals, rather, is the fact that the canonical view of white civilization (as in the act of “civilizing” others) is unconscious of its own propensity to imitate and integrate the innovations of those “being civilized.” Thus, the construction of whiteness as civil standard is likewise the construction of “a genealogy through which an autonomous racial identity is both authenticated” and “created,” only this process emphasizes autonomy by repressing the intercultural and interracial “origins” of modern civilization, while Hurston’s notion of origination brings the hybrid nature of cultural production to the surface.

In her downplaying of historical origins and sources and her emphasis on cultural contact and hybridity as the relativist “genesis” of new cultural forms of expression—some canonical and some subversive, but each integral to modern civilization in the New World—Hurston anticipates some of the discursive theories of Edouard Glissant. Barbara Ladd, in *Resisting History*, finds many of Glissant’s theories useful in her reading of Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, the result of fieldwork Hurston conducted in Jamaica and Haiti in 1936 and 1937. These theories, moreover, are also useful in rereading her other works, as her interest in the idea of creolization and cultural hybridity both precedes and exceeds her visit to the Caribbean. In her earlier ethnographic work in the South, she was drawn to hybrid cultural practices like Hoodoo and Voodoo. Her interest in Caribbean culture is, in this way, an extension of her interest in Southern folklore, just as Glissant’s interest in the South (see *Faulkner, Mississippi*) is an extension of his interest in Caribbean

discourse. Thus, what Ladd says of *Tell My Horse*, I believe, also rings true of Hurston's earlier works: "Hurston struggles in the heterogeneity of time and place and with multiple histories, she walks in the traces of other times, other places, and other texts, and she experiences the violence and violations of History" (131). My survey of Hurston's theories of history and cultural production are crucial to my subsequent readings of *Jonah* and *Moses*. Religion is a central topic in each of these works, and the theories drawn from Hurston's non-fiction and supplemented by the work of Glissant will help demonstrate how Hurston undermines key assumptions about the South's predominant religion.

Like Hurston, Glissant dismisses the preoccupation with both origin mythology and the Westernized view of canonical time that privileges narratives of continuity—like the European history of civilization—over more discontinuous histories of displaced and transplanted people. Thus, he posits the notion of *diversion* as a Creole way of resisting the Western impulse to adhere to a more linear historical narrative. "Diversion," writes Glissant, "is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by revision: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that," he emphasizes, "is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish" (26).

According to J. Michael Dash, Creole identity for Glissant does not depend on the impossible recovery of some lost, precolonial African paradise; instead, he subverts colonial discourse by refusing to accept the historical terms of "cultural purity, racial authenticity and ancestral origination" (148). Paul Gilroy redefines the significance of cultural "roots" in the African diaspora in a way that resembles both Hurston's and Glissant's redefinitions of origin; for Gilroy, roots signify "a process of movement and

mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (9). Roots, as routes, in other words, signify cultural movements and not culture’s contingency on linear progress. Like Hurston before him, Glissant is wary of any preoccupation with origins, because such a fixation reproduces the colonizer’s insistence on continuity and linearity as indicators of authenticity and cultural legitimacy. As he explains, “[t]he first impulse of the transplanted population which is not sure of maintaining the old order of values in the transplanted locale is that of reversion. Reversion,” he adds, “is the obsession with a single origin: one must not alter the absolute state of being. To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact,” and to ignore experience (16). But the process of creolization, he argues, makes it increasingly impossible for transplanted people to maintain “the impulse to revert [...] as the memory of the ancestral country fades,” and will be replaced by an impulse to imitate the oppressor, which becomes “a kind of insidious violence.” In the face of this violence, the transplanted slave “takes possession of the language imposed by his master” and transforms it until it is indecipherable, just as Hurston had described the modification and re-interpretation of ideas in general and religion in particular. Diversion, like modification, becomes a form of linguistic and cultural resistance through which the “community [tries] to exorcise the impossibility of return” (18)—or, in Hurston’s words, the impossibility of “get[ting] back to original sources” (1046). Thus, Glissant displaces notions like permanence, origin, purity, and reversion with new theories of entanglement, contact, creolization, and diversion. For a transplanted culture to simply pick up where it left off before the traumatic moment of displacement, his logic goes, is to negate the subaltern histories and tactics that have been

cultivated in response to colonial oppression, and, in so doing, to revalorize the dominant paradigm of *History*.

Glissant's theories help elucidate Hurston's understanding of innovative originality. Both authors remove the connotation of inauthenticity and invalidity from the ideas of revision, reinterpretation, and modification. These concepts, moreover, are of particular relevance to any discussion of Hurston's fictive and ethnographic representations of black Protestantism in the South and its creole nature. According to William E. Montgomery:

[P]eople who came to America from different societies in Africa with distinctive languages incorporated common constructions with the language patterns of their English masters to form a totally new, creole grammar that enabled them to communicate among themselves and forge new communities and social institutions. They took from African as well as European traditions to formulate a new, coherent religion that explained their origins, their present oppression, and their ultimate salvation. (13)

In addition to the creolization of "European traditions," Hurston recognized the repressed creole nature of civilization in general. And just as she points out that Christianity was "formulated" by an outsider, so too does she perceive Southern religion to be the product of interracial and intercultural entanglement. This view, in turn, challenges the Bible Belt nostalgia for a purer Old-Time religion that repressed the dominant religion's indebtedness to black slaves' modification of it, just as both black and white forms of Southern Protestantism repressed the contributions of women banned from the pulpit.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* traces the ministerial career of Reverend John Pearson in a way that both allegorizes and mythologizes the history of black Protestantism. Hurston views the Church as a containment site that localizes the tension between authorized and unauthorized forms of cultural memory and expression. The overtones of Hurston's

representation of the Church are often condemning, but the Church also becomes a potentially regenerative site of intercultural tension and influence, providing a critical locus of cultural production in the black community. While the momentum of Christianization, on the surface, pushes against the surviving influences of a seemingly more “authentic” African religion and culture, it is the conflict itself—the moment of entanglement—that occasions cultural innovation and creation.

For Hurston, the practice of originating new cultural forms at the site of intercultural contact paradoxically points to the essence of “Negro expression”—paradoxically, that is, because such racial essentialism is inherently relativist. A surface reading of the novel and her non-fiction writings about religion might overlook the essential relativism of her thinking. This chapter, however, argues that her view of the Church cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between authentic African survivals and superficial Christian iconography. Rather, the Church proves to be a significant ingredient in the hybrid virility she associates with black culture. Since for Hurston all cultural production—and therefore that of American and Southern Christianity in general—is the result of hybridization, it is the conscious acceptance of inextricable intersectionality and cultural entanglement as the domain of human innovation that sets Hurston’s model of originality apart from any strict adherence to fictions of cultural purity, including the veneration of pure and simple Old-Time Southern religion.

While the Church, as a site of cultural production, presents an opportunity for creating a positive sense of collective identity in the black community, it also runs the risk of reproducing the patriarchal structures of authority inherent in their white counterparts, which necessitates a recurrent intervention and revision of the black

Church's unauthorized histories. Strong female characters in *Jonah* and *Moses* constitute a counter-voice or voices that, while not ordained like the voices of male preachers and prophets, exert an often unacknowledged influence on the religion's development. In this way, Hurston assigns genders to competing types of historical consciousness: a masculine, canonical history that tends to purge the past of cultural contradictions, and a feminine, apocryphal history that more readily permits historical ambivalence and ambiguity. In more concrete terms, however, this gendered difference has both historical and autobiographical significance, since many Protestant denominations, both black and white, were opposed to ordaining women to preach the Gospel from the authorizing position of the pulpit. As Roxanne Mountford writes, pulpits serve as "metonym for the Protestant Church as institution (as in the location 'the Pulpit,' meaning 'Church'), the pulpit as site of clerical authority, and the pulpit as emblem of the nature of God" (18). But while the pulpit can be taken to represent the Church as a whole, its significance also depends on its separation and distinction from the congregation: "Pulpits are a physical enactment of an idea about the relationship of people to priest," writes Mountford, and the distance in authority that the pulpit creates between the (male) preacher and the congregation "are enduring features of preaching theory tied to larger ideas of authority and nationhood." The "connection between preachers and national male leaders," moreover, "was made explicit after 1850 when homileticians began importing precepts drawn from the 'cult of manhood' into the training of preachers" (129-131). According to Mountford, many women preachers challenged the nationalist model of religious authority by drawing parallels between themselves and biblical prophets:

Rarely welcomed by those who hear them, prophets stand on the margins of society while calling for fundamental change. According to Old Testament

tradition, a prophet need not fulfill the culture's ideals, need not be the right gender, need not be willing...The prophet's role was special and proved that God was above cultural expectations. (117).

With this in mind, female preachers “drew on the prophet's character in order to preach reform to her people (117). Just as these women preachers had to identify with the outsider prophets of the Bible in order to validate their right to preach, Hurston, as I have shown, could only claim her father's religion as her own by identifying with integral outsiders like Paul. To feel integral to a religion that so disempowers women, Hurston makes us acknowledge that “real” prophets are always outsiders, thus recovering a prophetic view of Southern culture and its integrated religion.

Hurston, like Miriam in her retelling of the Exodus story in *Moses*, became a prophet who could operate “above cultural expectations” and create a space of authorship and self-determination in presumed defiance of the pulpit she was barred from entering. In his reading of *Jonah*, John Lowe makes a similar connection between Hurston's authorial aspirations and the pulpit that forbade her authorial voice: “the process of appropriating, mimicking, reshaping, and parodying ‘sacral’ utterances—those of preacher, prophets, and God himself—began on a large scale in *Jonah*. More importantly, Hurston began her novelistic career by appropriating the voice of her *earthly* father, the preacher John Hurston” (86). Similarly, as Gary Ciuba observes, “Hurston spoke from the pulpit every time she wrote” (119). In doing so, Hurston reenacts her father's defiant path of self-determination. As Lowe points out, preaching offered many Southern black males an avenue for socioeconomic ascent rarely available in other lines of work. In the face of racial discrimination, “[o]ne of the ways to avoid being at the bottom, as Hurston's book demonstrates, was to mount the pulpit” (88). But Hurston mounted her

figurative pulpit in the face of both racial *and* gender discrimination. Hurston also recognizes that cultural appropriation often reproduces some of the oppressive tendencies of that which it seeks to subvert. As the pulpit became central in the black community and contributed to the development of a distinct racial and cultural identity, it also reproduced, *within* the black community, some of the sexist and authoritarian tendencies of nationalistic models of male leadership. As an author appropriating the voice of the preacher, therefore, Hurston aspired to find her own voice and to be heard just like her father. But she also recognized in such aspirations the risk of reproducing a rigid individualism that establishes a collective identity at the cost of dissenting voices within the community; thus, she tries to curb these tendencies through techniques of diversion and indirection.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* represents the development of black Protestantism in the South explicitly in terms of hybridity that undermine the Bible Belt's cultural coherence and consensus. Nowhere is Hurston's preoccupation with religion more central than in *Jonah*, which draws much of its source material from her fieldwork on black folklore as well as her own life experiences. The novel tells the story of John Pearson, a black tenant farmer turned preacher and based largely on Hurston's father. At the outset, John is an adolescent and works as a farm hand picking cotton for his sharecropping stepfather, Ned. When Ned, who feel mocked by his stepson's light skin, threatens to lend John out to an infamously cruel, poor white farmer named Mimms, John runs away to the neighboring town of Notasulga "across the creek." There he meets former slave-owner Alfred Pearson, implied to be John's biological father. Thus Hurston's central black preacher is actually biracial draws even more attention to the very literal side of the

hybridity inherent in cultural production. The Southern taboo of miscegenation prevented many Southern whites from openly recognizing the both-and-ness of a largely biracial black population. In Hurston's historical perspective, the cultural conversion of a biracial man into a black man enacts the problem of canonicity that other forms of history, like oral folk traditions, work against. Canons disentangle history by rooting out deviations that do not conform to the dominant narrative; other forms of cultural memory, like folklore, produce dialogic, both-and narratives of entanglement.

Alf Pearson takes a guardedly paternalistic interest in John's wellbeing, and John becomes Pearson's servant. Pearson also insists that John go to school. When the school master asks John what his last name is, John scratches his head and says, "Deed ah don't know, suh." The teacher, learning that John was born on the Pearson plantation, tells John, "Well, Ah'll jus' put you down as John Pearson and you answer by that, you hear?" (26). This essentially reverses the familiar trope of renaming found in slave narratives, in which escaped slaves denounce their former owners' surnames and choose new names as an expression of their freedom. In John's case, however, he runs *back* to the plantation where he was born and takes on the name of his mother's former owner.

At the end of the cotton-picking season, Alfred Pearson sends John back across to creek to check on his mother, and there the farmers and their community celebrate the end of the harvest with a barbeque. As the musicians tune their guitars and banjos, an unnamed individual says, "Hey you, dere, us ain't no white folks! Put down dat fiddle! Us don't want no fiddles, neither no guitars, neither no banjos. Less clap!" Then the narrator reports:

So they danced. They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it. With their hands they played

upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum that is made by priests and sits in majesty in the juju house. The drum with the man skin that is dressed with human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone and apeaks to gods as a man and to men as a God. Then they beat upon the drum and danced. It was said, "He will serve us better if we bring him from Africa naked and thing-less." So the bukra reasoned. They tore away his clothes that Cuffy might bring nothing away, but Cuffy seized his drum and hid it in his skin under the skull bones. The shin-bones he bore openly, for he thought, "Who shall rob me of shin-bones when they see no drum?" So he laughed with cunning and said, "I, who am borne away to become an orphan, carry my parents with me. For Rythym is she not my mother and Drama is her man?" So he groaned aloud in the ships and hid his drum and laughed." (29-30)

This passage, according to Anthea Kraut, is not meant as a literal depiction of an authentic African ritual, but rather as a figurative transportation of the "African American participant back to an African past." Furthermore, Hurston qualifies this presumed "bridge back to an idyllic, pre-rupture moment" when she states that "Ibo tune corrupted with Nago. Congo Gods talking in Alabama." Thus, Kraut concludes, "[a]lthough Hurston still claims the forms as African in character, they are portrayed as neither pure nor immutable, but rather hybridized and 'corrupted'" so that "cultural genealogies suggested in the enactment of the dance are ultimately left partial and provisory (72).

Hurston purposefully represents this figurative African ritual as taking place outside the restricting walls of the Church, where members must prohibitively call their "Congo gods by Christian names" (89). On the one hand, such statements reflect Hurston's critical view of her father's religion. As I have established, however, Hurston tended to view similar claims to cultural authenticity with suspicion, so the distinction she attempts to maintain here underplays the hybrid production of an African-infused Christianity, and vice versa, that John's subsequent ministry comes to represent. Later in the novel, after John has moved to Eatonville, Florida and become a successful preacher,

he defeats current mayor Sam Mosely in the mayoral election. Sam says that he knows how John beat him: “it wuz de way you and Lucy (John’s wife) led de gran’ march night ‘fo’ las’ at de hall, but by rights uh preacher ain’t got no business dancing.” Sam uses John’s own religious prohibitions against worldly vices like dancing to accuse him not playing fair in the election because he violated the internal logic of the Gospel he preaches—that he is a religious hypocrite, in short. But John retorts, “Grand marchin’ ain;t dancin’. Ah never cut uh step,” which another man named Joe confirms: “you ain’t dancin’ ‘til yuh cross yo’ feet,” he says (114). John’s ability to dance without crossing his feet innovatively negotiates Protestant modesty and cultural immodesty. To dance without dancing becomes both an exhibition and a deflection of John’s and Lucy’s “moves.” It is the tension itself—of trying to do something without doing it—that leads to the kind of ingenuity that Hurston sees as the strength of black forms of expression. In this light, the earlier African dance scene, while seeming to represent an uninhibited expression of an African heritage, can be read as a similar exercise using restrictions as catalysts for innovation. The group decides to create music and to dance without instrumental accompaniment, using only their bodies, even though the banjos they put down because they “ain’t no white folks” are derived from African culture.<sup>30</sup> Hurston, in effect, uses an African-derived object as a marker of white culture. Whether she does so unwittingly, the ironically African signifier of “white folks” confirms her notion of originality as perpetual modification. In a colonial sense, white American culture seems

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<sup>30</sup> Some historians and anthropologists trace the banjo back to Africa. According to Douglas B. Chambers, for instance: “Igbo instruments like box drums and a banjolike stringed instrument were common in Virginia and North Carolina. The word *banjo* itself signifies Igbo, as in *ba-njo* (being bad), and it is curious that in Jamaican Creole *banja* means ‘to play the fool.’ The banjo, as Thomas Jefferson noted, was an instrument ‘brought hither from Africa,’ and many Central African peoples called their version of a stringed gourd by variations of *mbanza*” (180).

to have stolen the musical instrument and repressed its African past; however, in light of Hurston's understanding of cultural entanglement, the scene suggests that the genius of black creativity is the idea that all signifiers are mutable and unfixed and therefore subject to creative modification. The ritual does not depend on the banjo as an authenticating African relic, because Hurston views cultural survival in terms of performance rather than mere inheritance. John's and Lucy's "gran marchin'" is a remarkable performance, in part, because it simultaneously thwarts and upholds religious convention and, in the process, reforms those conventions to accommodate "original" forms of expressions.

As an adolescent in Notasulga, John, a strong and strapping young man who is great at telling folktales, is immediately popular with the young women. But John is especially enthralled by Lucy Potts, a younger but quick-witted girl whose book smarts in school and talents in the church choir make John even more eager to learn how to read, write, and sing. Eventually, John courts Lucy, and they exchange letters when John is away working at a tie camp. But Lucy's mother does not approve of John and thinks Lucy would be marrying down to marry him. When John sees their house, the narrator reports, he "noted the prosperous look of the Potts place. It was different than every other Negro place that he had ever seen. Flowers in the yard among whitewashed rocks" (68). The Potts family, unlike John's, are reputable churchgoers with "religious mottos on the wall." Here, Hurston subtly differentiates between class consciousness and racial consciousness (see note 3). While Lucy's mother, Emmeline, sees socioeconomic mobility as the means of self- and familial-determination, Lucy's romanticism—wanting to choose a husband out of love despite his lack of property—stubbornly goes against her

mother's wishes. And since Emmeline's socioeconomic ambitions are often coded in terms of racial betrayal (for instance, the whitewashed stones in front of their prosperous looking house) then Lucy's and John's rebellious, class-transcending attraction to one another seems, conversely, to imply racial allegiance. Lucy's reversal of her mother's ostensible upward mobility via the imitation of whiteness thus implies a "downward" mobility toward racial authenticity. But that racial paradigm does not entirely conceal Hurston's earlier discussed approach to essential racial relativity. Lucy and John's courtship and subsequent marriage, in "returning" to a lower socioeconomic base, signifies less a reversion to racial authenticity, a return to an origin, than a foundational step toward an alternative and more subversive form of cultural production (and racialization) that modifies and reinterprets socioeconomic ascent in terms that Lucy can help define—as opposed to merely accepting the predefined terms of cultural production inherent in "marrying up" as an implicitly inferior and submissive wife of a propertied man. Lucy is just as ambitious as her mother, but she is crafty in her own way of making the man she marries. But Lucy suffers in the process of creation and falls victim to a wife-made man who loses sight of his indebtedness to her, starts to believe in his own God-given authority as an ordained (male) preacher of the Gospel, and grows more abusive.

In the Potts house, John and Lucy reticently converse under the watchful eye of her mother. Unable to speak his thoughts openly, John grabs the slate and pencil that she uses at school and writes Lucy a secret note. As the narrator reports, "Emmeline couldn't read a word and she was afraid that no one would read it correctly for her, but one thing she was sure of, she could erase as well as the world's greatest professor. She spoiled out

the words with a corner of her apron, and put the slate back under the table. Not a word was passed” (72). Further complicating the relationship between class and racial consciousness, Emmeline, though more “proper” and propertied than John, lacks the schooling of the younger generation, and the association of John and Lucy with literacy seems to complicate their relationship as racially “authentic” couple that chooses their own path rather than Lucy ascending to the middle class through a more socioeconomically practical marriage. In these terms, Lucy being true to her heart implies being true to her race. Literacy therefore enables communication and racial communion across class distinctions. Religion, like literacy, also becomes a potential vehicle for racial communion and self-determination, as the following story of John and Lucy’s marriage reveals.

Although Emmeline knows that modern culture privileges literacy, she also understands that the power of literacy lies just as much in what is unsaid and unvoiced—especially by those denied access to education—as it does in what is officially recorded in History by its ostensible keepers, the “world’s greatest professors.” She channels the power of erasure in her spoiling out of John’s note on the slate, an ultimately futile attempt to disrupt Lucy’s relationship with John. The slate therefore becomes an obvious metaphor for the questionable reliability of historical memory, susceptible to smudging and to being distorted and modified. The slate also critiques the process of Western civilization, through the means of literacy, as an authorial and linear progression toward the future with an authenticated claim on the past. If white America is the legitimate heir to the throne of civilization, it is because History has omitted the claims of others as unreliable. The “double slate” offers a modified view of collective memory, constantly

being erased and written over but often retaining indecipherable traces of earlier writings. As slate, it carries the connotation of stone, but its message is certainly unfixed and mutable.<sup>31</sup>

In a seeming distraction from the main plotline, the novel then turns to a comical sketch of an unrelated wedding. Mehaley, whose advances John had repeatedly rejected, is somewhat reluctantly getting married to Pomp Lamar, who loves Mehaley more than she does him. But the narration focuses on a heated dispute between Mehaley's father, mother, and Elder Wheeler, the preacher that the mother has brought in to officiate the wedding. "Ah wants dis done real," the mother of the bride tells the father, who insists on preaching the ceremony of his firstborn daughter's wedding. "If us wuz down in de swamp whar us couldn't git tuh no preacher, you'd do, but here de pastor is. You ain't nothin' but uh jack-leg. Go set in de chimbley corner and be quiet," to which her husband replies, "You always tryin' tuh make light uh mah preachin.'" Finally, after hours of debate, the father wins. Unable to read, he recites the ceremony from memory while pretending to read from an upside-down almanac, which he held "open pompously to give the lie to the several contentions that he could not read" (83). This abrupt cut-away from the story of John and Lucy reinforces Hurston's nuanced views of the relation between cultural production, memory, literacy, and orality. The father wants desperately to feel a sense of control and contribution to his and his daughter's sense of determination, but his wife undermines his sense of authority and tells him to remain

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<sup>31</sup> In "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad,'" Freud draws a similar analogy between the memory and writing—or between our distrust of memory and faith in the written word. The mystic pad—like a "magic slate" or Magnidoodle—is a single reusable writing surface that retains traces and imprints of what has been erased, and Freud suggests that the subconscious retains partial and distorted fragments of forgotten or erased memories.

quiet and unheard while an educated and ordained preacher lends his authority to legitimize the marriage. The father's preaching is thus unofficial and illegitimate outside the unofficial maroon community of the swamps. The reputable town of Notasulga does not recognize his authority. But he wears them out in the end and comically mimics the language and movements of an ordained clergyman. In one sense, the father of the bride bears the brunt of the humor in the scene, as he is almost infantilized in his pretending to read. Still, he uses his cunning and wit to enter the pulpit, which then venerates the adaptive power of improvisation and of creatively performing from memory rather than reading from a script.

Interestingly, this section glosses over the marriage of John and Lucy, whom the reader learns are married with children following the tangential wedding scene. After Lucy and John marry, John is unfaithful and has a series of trysts with different women while constantly leaving an increasingly enfeebled Lucy to tend to their children alone. As John returns from a rendezvous with Big 'Oman (perhaps signifying big omen?) across the Alabama River, a severe storm moves in, and a huge drifting log tears through the bridge as he crosses it. He swims to the other side of the shore, but something knocks him in the back of the head. Unconscious, he has a vision in which he "strode across infinity where God sat upon his throne and looked off towards immensity and burning worlds dropped from his teeth" (87). When he comes to, John is back at home with Lucy, who is happy that John had not been "herded tuh judgment in [his] sins" (88). John repents and avows his love for Lucy, and at the "next big meeting John pray[s] at church" (89). His prayer has so much "fire" that it mesmerizes the congregation, who thereafter want him to pray more and more:

John never made a balk at a prayer. Some new figure, some new praise-giving name for God, every time he knelt in church. He rolled his African drum up to the altar, and called his Congo gods by Christian names. One night at the altar-call he cried out his barbaric poetry to his 'Wonder-workin' God so effectively that three converts came thru religion under the sound of his voice (89)

As Deacon Moss observes, "he done more'n de pastor" (89). These prayers thus foreshadow his future as a preacher, but they do not mark a significant change in John's behavior and habits. Still unfaithful, perpetually absent, and fiscally irresponsible, John places a large burden on Lucy. When her brother comes to collect a debt, Lucy, who is again very pregnant, tells him to come back when John is home. Her brother refuses and takes the only possession of value in the house, a bed that Alfred Pearson had given them as a wedding gift. When John returns he is furious and tracks down and beats his brother-in-law nearly to death. He is then arrested and thrown in jail, but Alfred Pearson bails him out. With the looming threat of lynching by "nightriders" or the trial that would likely end with John's being sent to the chain gang, Pearson convinces John to leave town and not come back.

By way of train, John ends up in Florida, but his destination, the narrator reports, "was purely accidental" (103). Throughout the novel, Hurston is often careful to avoid the socioeconomic language of predetermination and the religious language of predestination. In part, this aligns with her relatively conservative boot-straps politics, but it also puts the focus on the black individuals' and communities' capacity to perpetually modify and redefine their individual, racial, religious, and national identities, perhaps even in radical and revolutionary ways. As it is in biological evolution, it is often the "accidents" in nature that allow some to adapt to different environments better than others; similarly, mutation and modification and disruptions in continuity are the sites of

cultural production for Hurston. That Hurston sees such opportunity in historical accidents goes against the broad Bible Belt perception of providence in Southern history—how God has a particular interest in Southern affairs and implicitly endorses a regional culture that fights against the national trends of secularization. The emphasis on accidental destinations also goes against the insistence that Southern religion in the 1930s was part of a long-standing and firmly rooted religious heritage, not the byproduct of cultural turbulence and intersectionality that would only later be memorialized in the more concrete and stabilizing terms of the Bible Belt.

In Florida, John finds work at a railroad camp. One Sunday, John and his fellow workers go to a church service, and back at the camp, “John preached the sermon himself for the entertainment of the men...and he aped the gestures of the preacher so accurately that the crowd hung half-way between laughter and awe” (107). John’s companion Blue tells him, “You kin mark folks...Dass jes’ lak dat preacher fuh de world. Pity you ain’t preachin’ yo’self.” Blue then tells John of the all-black town of Eatonville, where “Dey got uh Meth’dis’ preacher over dere Ah wants yuh tuh mark” (107). After he saves enough money working as a carpenter in Eatonville, John sends for Lucy and their children to come join him. Upon her arrival, Lucy shows her strength as a partner and equal. She convinces John to start working for himself building houses, and when that proves successful she tells John to stop renting, to buy a piece of land, and to build a house of their own. John replies that such an undertaking is more than he “wants tuh tackle.” “You so big-eyed,” he tells Lucy, “Wese colored folks. Don’t be so much-knowin’” (109). Here, Lucy’s own ambitions and resourcefulness shine through her husband’s reservations, and when John brags to the other men about his new house,

Walter Thomas says, “Aw, ‘taint you, Pearson...iss dat li’l’ handful uh woman you got on de place” (109).

After Lucy’s arrival, they attend a Covenant Meeting at a church, and John announces that he has been called to preach the Gospel. Everyone approves, and it is arranged for John to preach a “trial sermon” at a larger church, because “so many wanted to hear him,” and he “had a church to pastor before hands had been laid on his head. The man who preached his ordination sermon was thrown deep in the shadow by the man who was to be ordained” (111). John is so effective that he moves from church to bigger church until he lands at Zion Hope in nearby Sanford. All the while, he sticks to his philandering ways. But Lucy, against John’s pretense that his words just come to him, as if from angels, says, “God don’t call no man, John, and turn ‘im loose uh fool.” She dismisses his predestined calling to preach and instead focuses on his creative powers as an orator. In fact, she had earlier undermined the fate of his calling before their courtship, when she says to herself, “Dat boy is called tuh preach and don’t know it. Ahm gwine tell him so.” On the one hand, Lucy confirms John’s calling; on the other, it is Lucy, not God, who in telling John that he is called becomes the caller. Lucy, not God, calls John to preach. Whereas John too readily interprets his power as God-given and his success therefore as inevitable, Lucy counters and advises him on how best to keep his position of power: “you treatin’ ‘em too good. Don’t pomp up dem deacons so much. Dey’ll swell up and be de ruination of yuh” (112). In this way, Lucy coaches and cultivates John’s ministry, despite being forbidden from speaking from the pulpit directly with her own ordained voice.

In Hurston's fiction, feminine counter-narratives like Lucy's subvert dominant narratives of lineage by offering alternate and often hybrid accounts of how male prophets acquire their authority, a pattern that Hurston will repeat in *Moses* through the character of Miriam. While John's gift as an orator is essential to his success as a preacher, Hurston never lets John, or the reader, forget that he is, in part, "Uh wife-made man" (113). Lucy shapes her husband into a prominent preacher and leader, but when John loses sight of his indebtedness to Lucy and his congregation, he loses his post and position in the community. As much as John clearly depends on Lucy for his success, it is partly John's knowledge of his dependence on her that causes him, in his pride and sense of emasculation, to start resenting her. John starts an affair with a woman named Hattie, who is a stark contrast to Lucy, not only in size, shape, and manner, but in her religion, too. Hattie visits a conjure woman named Aunt Dangie (yet another strong folk female) to help put a curse on John that will keep him from breaking off their affair. Lucy's Christianity, on the other hand, rejects such superstition. John visits Lucy one last time, as she lies sick and dying in bed, and they argue. He tells her, "You jus' uh hold-back tuh me nohow" and "Ah don't need yuh no mo' nor nothing you got tuh say, Ahm uh man grown" (128). Lucy replies, "You can't clean yo'self wid yo' tongue lak uh cat" (129). John, not only feeling emasculated but feeling the power of his gifted tongue doubted by his wife, strikes Lucy in the face. John flees in fear back to Hattie while Lucy dies.

In the aftermath, John marries Hattie, but he resents her for not being Lucy. John realizes that he has lost his source of strength. Hattie proves an inferior and less tactful advisor. When the congregation expresses displeasure in John's hasty remarriage to Hattie following Lucy's death, Hattie defensively tells John, "Youse over dem and you

ought not tuh 'low 'em tuh cheap, but 'stid ud dat they comes right to yo' face and calls yo' wife a barrel uh dem things.” John responds, “Lucy ain't never had nobody call her out her name. Dey better not. Whut make *you* call her name? Hambo is de backbone uh mah church. Ah don't aim to tear de place to pieces fuh nobody. Put dat in yo' pipe and smoke it” (139-140). Because John fully realizes how much he depended on Lucy, she becomes all the more sacred in absentia, and he shows a reverence for his deceased wife that he had failed to show her when she was alive. At the same time, John is hesitant in buying a headstone for Lucy, which comes across as a puzzling act of irreverence. I would suggest, however, that John evades placing Lucy's headstone because it would reify and concretize her absence. In Lucy's absence, John internalizes and integrates her influence.

The novel concludes with a public divorce trial that ruins John's reputation and credibility in a town he once ruled. After leaving Sanford, John seems to find redemption in Plant City, where he begins again as a carpenter, remarries a propertied widow named Sally who shares many of Lucy's attributes, and preaches as a guest minister at a local church. Time lapses and Sally buys John a Cadillac and insists that he visit his friend Hambo back in Sandford. There, his new car draws attention from everyone, and a woman named Ora presses him to give her a ride. John seems helpless to resist her sexual advances. On his way back to Plant City, John's Cadillac is t-boned by a train. According to Loyalerie King, the fact that John fails to notice the train, a phallic symbol of the masculinity and authority that had preoccupied John his whole life, perhaps indicates that in his last moments he found the self-knowledge that his desire for power had inhibited (47).

On the surface, *Jonah* seems to allegorize a simplified version of black Protestantism in the South: John begins his career by “aping” other preachers for the sheer sake of entertainment, but people respond so well to his mock-sermons that he becomes a real preacher. As discussed earlier, Hurston herself often describes black Christianity as a thin veneer of a surviving African spiritualism. But the flipside of such statements, in light of the significance Hurston places on historical entanglement, is that Christianity is also, in a sense, a thin veneer for Southern white religion. Both are hybrid, and if we focus on religious *forms* instead of religious heritages, as Hurston does, the racial distinctions between white and black Protestantism in the South are blurred and, like Hurston’s description of Paul as an outsider, the interracial and intercultural foundations of Southern religion shatter the Bible Belt illusion of a simpler and purer religious past.

In her 1939 novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston further develops an underlying theory of historical revision and cultural re-production. And she again uses female characters to exhibit formal fluidity and adaptiveness in contrast to more rigid understandings of cultural production related to nationalism and nationalistic models of religious authority. The poetic license Hurston takes in retelling (and re-interpreting) the Bible in *Moses*, moreover, stands in the stark contrast to the religious climate of the South in the 1930s, during which time fundamentalism and its emphasis on biblical literalism, infallibility, and inerrancy found fertile ground in many Southern congregations. In fact, Hurston seems to allude to the tension between fundamentalism’s rigidly literalist hermeneutic and folklore’s tendency toward embellishment and wordplay when Moses, late in the novel, has a conversation with a talking lizard. The lizard implies

that he has descended from dinosaurs, which clearly reflects the fundamentalists' campaign against the teaching of evolution in the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee.<sup>32</sup>

Since the novel is a retelling of a Bible story in black dialect, moreover, it also becomes analogous to the hybridity inherent in the Christianization of American slaves, whose simultaneous influence on (or perhaps Africanization of) Southern religion and American religion at large is seldom acknowledged. As DuBois writes:

the religious growth of millions of men, even though they be slaves, cannot be without potent influence upon their contemporaries. The Methodists and Baptists of America owe much of their condition to the silent but potent influence of their millions of Negro converts. Especially is this noticeable in the South, where theology and religious philosophy are on this account a long way behind the North, and where the religion of the poor whites is a plain copy of Negro thought and methods. (130)

Of course, the provocative language of “plain copy” connotes a concern with authenticity that downplays the unending process of cultural recursion—of the copying of a copy of a copy that is the process of cultural (re)production. But his provocation is more a jab at the notion that white forms of Christianity are seen as uncorrupted forms of a “true” religion, a sentiment that lies at the core of Bible Belt thinking. Interestingly, Harold Bloom makes a similar observation about black influence on white Southern religion. “Since Episcopalianism was so rigorous a system of mediation,” Bloom writes, “it made a hopeless version of Christianity for Africans trapped in bondage. The far greater appeal of the Baptists was their almost unmediated access to Jesus; the Africans removed that ‘almost,’ and by making Jesus unmediated they made him black. It may be the greatest

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<sup>32</sup> In *Struggles Over the Word*, Timothy Caron’s reading of *Moses* provides an in-depth examination of racially distinct interpretive communities in the South and how they extract different meanings from the Bible.

irony of American religious history,” he concludes, “that the Southern Baptists, the heart of the Confederacy, came to worship an essentially black Jesus without ever knowing how he had been purified of his last elements of mediated or Catholic tradition” (245).

This regional tendency to unknowingly integrate cross-cultural and cross-racial forms is arguably an extension of a broader national phenomenon. Canonicity, as I have applied the concept in this chapter, entails the sanctioning of certain narratives to the exclusion of others, and the production of a national consciousness similarly entails an inflexible insistence on a concrete connection to the past that valorizes the present. Canons are thus authorized forms of cultural expression rooted in authorized historical narratives. Throughout the novel, Hurston masculinizes a canonical memory that is unaware of its own imaginative means of reproduction and contrasts such canonicity with a feminized folkloric memory that is more consciously revisionary. In doing so, she critiques nationalist movements—not exempting forms of Black Nationalism and the pseudo-nationalism of the Lost Cause—as inherently patriarchal in their aggressively maintained hierarchies of power and their silencing of women, who in many ways come to serve as a proxy for all voices silenced by historical canons.

In this novel, Hurston retells and reinterprets the biblical account of the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt in a way that subverts the legitimacy of the Patriarch Moses’s authority. Her retelling reveals how Moses’s authority is due not to his origin but to his sister’s creative imagination, while Miriam’s role as folk originator is forgotten in the Bible’s canonical account. Just as Lucy calls John to preach and helps shape his ministry, Miriam plays a huge role in transforming her brother into a religious patriarch. *Jonah*’s critique of gendered pulpits in Southern religion thus anticipates Hurston’s critique in

*Moses* of patriarchy, nationalism, and canonicity—via the conquest of Canaan and the founding of Israel.

Hurston's version of Exodus departs from the canonical account in several notable ways. Most noticeably, Hurston's Hebrews speak in black dialect, drawing a familiar parallel between African slaves in the United States and the Hebrews delivered from bondage in Egypt. For obvious reasons, the story of Exodus appealed to American slaves who often gleaned from Christian teachings and the Bible a more liberating message than did their white oppressors who emphasized such virtues as submissiveness. But Hurston does not exclusively focus on the image of emancipation prevalent in black spirituals that allude to Exodus; she also turns to the Hebrews' subsequent ascent to nationhood under the patriarch Moses. Thus, while acknowledging the positive influence of Christianity in African-American culture, she implicitly cautions against the unwitting reproduction of oppressive tendencies in the institutionalization of black churches following emancipation. And since churches during slavery were a significant civil center for the black community, religious leadership was more explicitly connected to political leadership (Hurston's father, for instance, was at different points both preacher and mayor), which in many ways links religion to political movements falling under the rubric of Black Nationalism.

Amiri Baraka, in *Blues People*, more aggressively charges that the black churches established after Emancipation grew more rigid and conservative, while new secular forms of subversion like the blues continued the tradition of creative adaptation:

[A]s the church grew more established and began to shape itself more and more in its image of the white man's church, the things it desired to achieve for Negroes began to change. The church began to produce social stations as well. The ministers, deacons, elders, trustees, even the ushers, of the Baptist and Methodist

churches formed a definite social hierarchy, and that hierarchy dominated the whole of the Negro society. The 'backslider' (the sinning churchgoer) and the 'heathen' became in the new theocracy the lowest rungs of the social ladder...But the end of slavery had, in many ways, a disintegrating effect on the kind of slave culture the church had made possible. With the legal end of slavery, there was now proposed for the Negro masses a much fuller life outside the church. (48-49)

What Albert J. Raboteau refers to as the "invisible institution" of slave religion, for Baraka, becomes less subversive, and implicitly less black, as it becomes the more visible institution of the free Black Church. Hurston echoes some of these sentiments, but she, like Raboteau, sees religion as retaining some of its potential for modifying rather than duplicating "the image of the white man's church." In her essay "the Sanctified Church," she praises the fringe denominations coming out of the Pentecostal-Holiness movement, which itself has an interesting interracial history. Regarding this movement, she writes that "the people who are now making spirituals are the same as those who made them in the past and not the self-conscious propagandist that our latter-day pity men would have us believe" (104). For Hurston, "the Sanctified Church is a revitalizing element in Negro music and religion. It is putting back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity as soon as the Negro came into contact with it, but which are being rooted out as the American Negro approaches white concepts" (105-6). Nostalgic narratives of a purer or truer religious past "root out" or repress cross-cultural religious forms in Southern history thus inhibit cultural revitalization. For Hurston, the "impurity" of intersecting religious forms of expression conversely rings true to the hybrid character of Southern religion.

Another "deviation" in Hurston's retelling is that Moses' true parentage remains uncertain. Whereas the biblical account places Moses in the direct line of Abraham, Hurston's retelling suggests that he is, in fact, Egyptian, despite his Hebrew supporters'

and Egyptian antagonists' claims.<sup>33</sup> Miriam, the daughter of the Hebrew slaves Amram and Jochebed, is entrusted with the safety of her new-born, unnamed brother following Pharaoh's decree, which reads: "Babies take notice: Positively no more boy babies allowed among Hebrews. Infants defying this law shall be drowned in the Nile" (2). Following Pharaoh's decree, Miriam puts her brother in a water-tight basket and sets him afloat in the Nile. At this point, Hurston's narrative clearly diverges from its biblical source. Miriam falls asleep near the shore, and when she wakes up, she finds that the basket has disappeared. As she searches desperately for her brother, she gets distracted by the "glorious sight" of a "large party of young women dressed in rich clothing [and] clustered on the bank" (26). When she returns home, her parents interrogate her regarding her brother's well-being. In fear of her parents' reproach, "suddenly an explanation flashe[s] across her brain" (29), and she tells her mother that the Pharaoh's daughter, who was among the women she saw gathered by the Nile, had found and taken the child as her own. This tale is circulated and reproduced among the Hebrews until the legend becomes the canonical story of Moses, the Hebrew patriarch. By the end of the chapter, "Miriam came to believe every detail of it as she added them and retold them time and time again"

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<sup>33</sup> In an obscure and seldom-noted coincidence, 1939 saw the publication of two books that questioned Moses's Hebrew ethnicity. In addition to Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, based on her earlier short story, "The Fire and the Cloud," Sigmund Freud also begins with the premise that Moses was, in fact, Egyptian in his book *Moses and Monotheism*, which argues that the Jewish religion was created when Hebrew tribal religion came into contact with the monotheism of an obscure Egyptian cult, of which the Egyptian Moses was a practitioner. I highlight this coincidence because it seems to reveal something about the political climate of the 1930s and prevalent anxieties over dangers of nationalism and patriarchy alike. As Freud prefaces his retelling of Exodus, "To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken light-heartedly—especially by one belonging to that people," but he then goes on to state that "truth" compels him more than "supposed national interests" (*Moses and Monotheism* 3). Freud's implied critique of Zionist interests, then, is figured, from the outset, as a form of cultural patricide, both in the sense that in Freud's account the liberated Hebrews assassinate Moses and in the sense that Freud, in his retelling, "den[ies] a people" their Patriarch. Like Hurston, Freud points to a discontinuity in lineage where the canon depends on genealogical continuity. Like Hurston, he replaces cultural purity with hybridity, not only undermining Moses' ethnicity but highlighting Egyptian traits in Judaism.

and as “[o]thers conceieved and added details at their pleasure and the legends grew like grass” (35). History, for Hurston’s Hebrews, thus represents a process of cultural production through narration. That Hurston’s revisionary story makes the folk origin of the canon visible suggests that Miriam is both originator and retractor of this canonical narrative. The feminine folk narrative, in this way, subverts the dominant masculine narrative and reveals the hybrid means of its production and modification (with details added in each retelling), even while those means are gradually concealed by the oral narrative as it becomes canonical.

Surprisingly, the ambiguity of origin in this novel challenges notions of racial essentialism that Hurston herself might be accused of propagating in much of her ethnographic writing. Over the course of the narrative, Moses comes to speak the same African-American dialect as the Hebrews, and his appropriation of language links him to “his” people and the knowledge of Voodoo that enables him to subvert Egyptian hegemony. Moreover, the power of oral history to distort and reconstruct collective memory, as depicted through the circulated legends of Moses in Goshen, the ghettoized province inhabited by the Hebrew slaves, further challenges racial essentialism by dramatizing Hurston’s definition of originality as the modification of received forms, an innovative (rather than strictly inventive) means of cultural reproduction.<sup>34</sup>

Moses, singular in his linguistic accomplishments, is able to supplement his Egyptian literacy and textual knowledge with the oral literacy of the Hebrews, who, forbidden from reading and writing, preserved their cultural legacy through other practices. Early in the novel, when a group of Hebrew men enter the palace and promise

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<sup>34</sup> Since “invention” connotes the creation of something new from nothing, while “innovation” connotes the repurposing of something already present toward unintended or unpredictable ends.

to be good citizens if the Pharaoh shows mercy, the Pharaoh responds, “Why should I trust people without monuments and memories? [...] It is a sign that you forget your benefactors as soon as possible after the need is past.” Note Hurston’s replacing of the verb “passed” with the noun “past,” which reinforces Pharaoh’s idea that the past, like a monument is an immutable object and not a creative endeavor. The phrase “the need is past,” moreover, links necessity to what is memorialized and a lack of necessity to what is forgotten; this reveals that Pharaoh’s theory of memorialization is just as fallible and subjective as the dubious non-monumental memory of the Hebrews.

In response to the Pharaoh’s accusation that the Hebrews’ memory is bad, one answers, “We don’t build monuments, but we do have memories. [...] It could be that memorial stones are signs of bad memories. We don’t trust our memories to stones” (22). The mutual suspicion of one another’s archival practices points to one of the main themes of Hurston’s text, the unreliability of memories and records; thus, they need to revive and revise the scriptural account of Moses. In Western culture, literacy and literature are thought to make memory more accurate and reliable—or perhaps truer to the source—but Hurston suggests that written words and canons, like stone memorials, are as fallible as oral histories. The critical difference is that the spoken word is less rigid and more adaptable, while memories carved in stone create a false sense of authority and authenticity. Memorials are inflexible and do not bend to the contours of history; instead, they violently straighten out the kinks and curves of experiential time.

In the closing scene of the novel, Moses meets a talking lizard on the top of Mount Nebo, overlooking Jordan and the Promised Land. He asks the lizard what he’s doing, to which the lizard responds, “Oh, just resting from living and thinking about the

time when my ancestors ruled the world.” When Moses asks him how he knows about his ancestors despite his short lifespan, the lizard says, “Oh, we lizards don’t try to keep our memories in our bodies. We have a keeper of the memories and when we want to know what used to be, we go to him to find out” (286). As a counterpoint to canonical memory, the passing down of unrecorded histories from generation to generation, from dinosaurs to lizards, valorizes Hurston’s responsibility as a storyteller and her aesthetic, developed as a written approximation of the oral tradition in folk culture. She emphasizes living memories over fossil records. The existence of dinosaurs, her lizard suggests, is alive in their inevitably evolved, mutated, and modified descendants, not merely in stone records. On the other hand, the lizard must “res[t] from living” in order to reflect about the past, which suggests that historical knowledge still requires some form of diversion from experience. To recall and represent the past, in other words, seems paradoxically to necessitate distance from it. Whereas textually literate cultures tend to view eye-witness and secondary accounts as becoming less reliable over time, Hurston sees the lapse between events and their recollection as crucial to the production of meaning. To regard archived records as more credible than oral histories, the passage suggests, is to refute the psychological and cultural nature of historical interpretation—how remembrance feeds the needs of the present. In this view, oral traditions are more conscious of the performative means of cultural production than are textual traditions that canonize a singular historical narrative as an empirical truth.

As with the Pharaoh’s distrust of the Hebrews’ memory, and vice versa, Moses’ interrogation of the lizard also demonstrates a distrust of others’ histories and historical sources. How can memories reach further back than one’s own life experience? This

distrust, which is shared by slaves, princes, and lizards, alike, attests to the power Hurston sees in the possession of one's own history, as well as the power to possess the history of another. As the conversation between the Hebrews and the Egyptians reveals, the way one defines history dictates how that history gets preserved. Neither party can efficiently communicate ideas to the other, for, while they are working with the same set of signifiers—the same language—they are referring to two distinct sets of signified experience. The Hebrews, in the “History” of the Egyptians, are powerless, while the Egyptians are ignorant of the Hebrews’ concurrent, subaltern “history.” The Egyptians cannot recognize this alternative “history,” because the way in which they recall the past is incompatible with the way in which the Hebrews have encoded their past. Thus, the Hebrews’ history is illegible to the Egyptians. On the other hand, the Hebrews risk losing their history if they accept the Egyptian paradigm that, without monuments, there can be no memory.

While Hurston’s Hebrews, themselves, seem to remember little before slavery and have no God of their own, that does not prevent them from claiming a collective memory. The Hebrews in *Moses* (who ironically build the monuments that preserve Egyptian memory) reinterpret the Egyptians’ monuments as signifiers of bad memory. Put another way, the Hebrew-built Egyptian monuments come to signify, in negative terms, precisely what the Pharaoh says the monument-less Hebrews do not possess: a memory of their own. As in Hurston’s remark that “so-called civilization” is, at least in part, the product of black culture’s modification of white culture, *Moses* persistently depicts monumental canons of Egyptian history being modified in a way that combines oral and literary traditions. According to Michèle Praeger, who discusses the concept of “oraliture,” a

conflation of oral and literary practices, people often associate orality with a primitive, irrational past because of the elevated status of the text in dominant ideologies as rational, transparent, and clear. Oral literature, on the other hand, is a dynamic form of expressing the inexpressible and resisting assimilation. Praeger describes oral literature, or rather a “literature of orality,” as a form of expression that can incorporate and include contradiction and variation in a similar manner as oral folklore—that is, in spoken discourse, the author responds to the back-talk of his or her audience; the oral text approximates this by being transparently dialogic.

Later in the novel, when Miriam dies in the wilderness after the successful emancipation and exodus of the slaves, Moses contemplates “how the threads of his life had gotten tangled with the threads of this homely slave woman. He wondered if she had not been born if he would have been standing there in the desert of Zin. In fact, he wondered if the Exodus would have taken place at all. [...] He doubted it.” The narrator then says, “A mighty thing had been done in the world through the stumbling of a woman who couldn’t see where she was going” (265-266). On one level, this reaffirms Miriam’s role in Goshen as a prophet and, thus, demonstrates the liberating potential of a shared dream of the past—of Moses’ Hebrew heritage. On the other hand, only in the face of death does Moses recognize her role in the building of the nation: “Moses called a halt and told the people what it meant to lose a patriot like Miriam [...] Her dust weighed as much as all Israel.” Just as John internalizes Lucy’s influence after her death, Miriam has to die before Moses consecrates her patriotism. Hurston makes Moses acknowledge his, and his new nation’s, indebtedness to Miriam. Still, the production of a national—and religious—consciousness imposes an overly masculinized and artificially linear narrative,

against which other narratives, voices, and experiences become unauthorized, apocryphal, and potentially lost. In the same way, Miriam's ashes are dust in the wind compared to Moses's enduring stone commandments.

Hurston uses female characters like Lucy and Miriam to subvert a canonically linear perception of time. In keeping with this, *Moses* uses highly gendered images of fertility and ovulation to signify discontinuity and disruption in historical discourse. In one scene, Moses thinks to himself, "Well, the present was an egg laid by the past that had the future inside its shell" (194). The image of the egg reiterates Hurston's feminine and maternal nature of cultural production through improvisational narration, but the explicit focus on the shell of the egg is consistent with her critique of pure origins, since for egg-laying creatures the point of birth is more indefinite and indirect. She thus retains a maternal concept of creation while complicating the linear sequence of birth-life-death. The shell, as temporal metaphor, disrupts any simple vision of origin, birth, or authenticity, for the incubational period creates a state of ambiguity—of being "laid" but not born. The egg, with its utterly recognizable and definite external form, nonetheless signifies an indefinite, protean interiority. The egg represents the incubational period in which the Hebrews, following emancipation, wander in the wilderness prior to the hatching of their national consciousness. But this image of hatching—like the conquest and colonization of Canaan, the forgetting of Miriam, and the denial of Moses's Egyptian identity—violently redefines the wilderness, not in the protean terms of fluidity and hybridity, but in the dogmatic terms of purgation and purification.

The image of the egg also takes on a reptilian connotation in the novel. Hurston's Moses (or, rather, the Hebrew child believed to become him) is born and hidden in a

dark, earthen hole under the wall like an egg. Growing up, he has an affinity to snakes and is able to speak with talking lizards. In addition, his father Amram speculates, at one point, that his biological child was likely eaten by a crocodile, suggesting that Moses was devoured, only to be “reborn” in Miriam’s imagination as a Hebrew-Egyptian prince. When Miriam stumbles upon the Pharaoh’s daughter and the other Egyptian women on the shore of the Nile, she sees one of them fetch from the water “a dark, oval object.” At the time, she describes the object as a vessel for bathing implements, but she subsequently claims that it was the basket that held her brother. Thus, the myth of Moses begins with this egg-shaped container and Miriam’s re-interpretation of it. Hurston’s emphasis on the temporal and physical distance of the egg from its source points to a gap in, or diversion from, a linear narrative, highlights the many possibilities uncertainties of what might happen in the interim: a laid egg might be eaten by a predator or be found and nurtured by an adoptive parent. The interim creates a period of ambiguity that brings the egg’s origin into question, and this uncertainty occasions cultural production and modification. For Hurston, however, this ambiguity or protean state of being is always the site of cultural possibility. Hurston’s fiction returns again and again to the wilderness, to the moment of entanglement, in order to resist the rigor mortis of cultural institutionalization. This tendency in her fiction extends Hurston’s youthful impulse to question her father’s religion as being “settled and known.”

Again, these implicit theories of historical construction liken Hurston’s work to Glissant’s subsequent discussions of Caribbean Discourse. According to Jeannie Suk, Glissant’s theories of diversion and detour explore “the possibility of a postcolonial project that is directed not toward recovering a lost authentic anteriority, but toward the

discontinuity itself and what is produced in the gap” (57). In *Moses*, the narrator describes the wilderness as a sort of incubator of identity: “And there was the desert and the wilderness and the forty years and the people. This was the second going-out. He had led out Pharaoh’s slaves. Now he must lead out a free and singing people from inside the cringing slaves” (266). This second exodus, this emergence from a nomadic detour in the wilderness into the Promised Land, reveals how Moses purposefully uses the wilderness as a petri dish to cultivate a new religious and national consciousness. On the other hand, this passage also conveys the dilemma of the emancipated slaves as wanting to create an identity separate from the legacy of slavery, an identity based on “singing” rather than “cringing.” Hurston aspired in her art to depict black culture not as the deprived and depraved product of oppression but as the vibrant and creative producers of new cultural forms. When the Promised Land becomes an accepted reality rather than an impulse toward cultural re-formation, however, the means of production and cultivation become hidden. The distinction is akin to the difference between adhering to an already settled religion and creating new religious forms like the revitalized religion of the “Sanctified Church” described by Hurston.

In the Hebrew canon, Moses is the traditional author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, and his authorship gives credence to the biblical account of the Exodus story. Hurston substitutes an account that integrates multiple voices and perspectives. And with Miriam’s improvisational story of Moses’s origin, we get an account that encompasses the canon while also preceding and exceeding it, undercutting Moses as the exclusive author of the story. Hurston’s retelling restores orality to the myth. Her use of free indirect discourse, moreover, has the effect of

partially concealing her own authorial voice, while a dialectical tension remains between the adaptive orality she prizes and the literary tradition in which she operates—a tradition that continues to favor the single-author text. The tension between myth and canon, between unauthorized and authorized memory, is crucial to understanding Hurston's view of Southern religion.

In both *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses*, Hurston imagines a Southern religion that, rather than being true to any one source, is true to its eclectic and hybrid character. In that way, her vision of Southern religion challenges the Old-Time religion of Southern white nostalgia. If, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, Bible Belt nostalgia for Old-Time religion often passes for “good” memory, Hurston shows how bad memory indicates a more prophetic religion because it reveals, rather than conceals, competing cultural narratives of the South's religious makeup. As her discussion of the Sanctified Church demonstrates, so-called “bad” memory is a crucial ingredient for reviving prophetic forms of Southern religion in the present.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the nostalgic consecration of a narrowly defined “Old Time” religion helped reinvent Southern Protestantism as an engine of cultural conformity. Foregrounding countercultural strands of the early evangelical movement in Southern history, I have suggested that the dissonance, *not* the consonance, between the religious past and present makes religion a volatile and potentially irruptive force in the Southern literary imagination. In this conclusion, I want to briefly explore the implications and benefits of this thesis to a reconsideration of another, less widely read Southern author.

Erskine Caldwell was a popular and successful Southern writer in the 1920s and 30s, but he garnered less favor with the literary critics who first established that period as a renaissance of creative outpouring in the nation’s poorest, most uneducated region. While championing writers like Faulkner for capturing the complexities of Southern culture, these critics viewed Caldwell as an embarrassment. For Instance, Cleanth Brooks observes that “[s]ome of the sustaining fiction (of the white trash stereotype) has been popular indeed, as witness Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre* and similar tales sold in paperback volumes in drugstores throughout the land” (*William Faulkner* 11). With specific regard to Southern religion, Louis D. Rubin notes, “For the novelist such as Erskine Caldwell, who exploited the Georgia countryside in books that achieved record-breaking sales, the Southern preacher is a humorous figure and a backwoods revival an exploration into sexual comedy” (51-2). In short, Caldwell’s fiction lacked the kind of empathy and nuance that readers like Brooks and Rubin found in worthier Southern literature.

Given the severity of Caldwell's fictional treatment of poor white Southerners and their religion, it is not difficult to understand how readers frequently take his satire as an expression of antipathy. His unromanticized portrayals of depraved poor sharecroppers in rural Georgia during the Great Depression repulsed Southern Agrarians like Brooks who valorized the preindustrial agrarian lifestyle that the forces of modernization were corroding. In *The Southern Renaissance*, Richard H. King illuminates this Agrarian nostalgia for a simpler and purer past when he paraphrases Allen Tate's "backward glance" thesis, which asserts that "the Renaissance was the product of the creative tension between the Southern past and the pressures of the modern world" (4). This argument, however, belies the notion of cultural preservation. In this thesis, the threat of modernity was an essential ingredient in, not an obstacle to, the Agrarian understanding of the South, its history, and its literature, just as the perceived threat of modernity helped produce late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century formulations of the South's religious tradition. The "creative tension," then, was not between the agrarian past and the modern present, for the Agrarian articulation of the past was itself a modernist construct in response to contemporary cultural turmoil; rather, the creative tension was between competing cultural narratives of "the South" and what it meant to be "Southern."

As I have argued, the Bible Belt narrative of a distinctly "Southern" religion overwhelmingly dominates other cultural accounts of religion in the region. Caldwell's work is ripe for reanalysis along the lines of inquiry modeled in this dissertation. Not only is he a long-time outlier in the canons of Southern literature that favor ostensible representations of a culturally integral Southern religious exceptionalism, but, according to Guy Owens, he also wrote more "about religion in fiction than any of his fellow

novelists” (*Deep South* ix). A consistent ridiculer of Southern religion, Caldwell nevertheless conveys the underlying sentiment that the destructive religious tendencies he caricaturizes are not immutable. In *You Have Seen Their Faces*, he writes, “The failure of the Church to preach its own convictions in the sharecropper country has resulted in its becoming a burlesque of religion” (40). In his 1966 memoir *Deep South*, originally titled *Under the Shadow of the Steeple*, Caldwell also laments the conflation of religion and conservative Southern politics: “It was during this era”—the beginning of the twentieth century—“that reactionary fundamentalist religion and states’ rights politics were amalgamated to such a degree that even in the nineteen-sixties they were still synonymous and inseparable” (233). Throughout his memoir, Caldwell pairs caricatures of religious absurdities with an inexplicable desire to see Southern Protestantism excel beyond its worst tendencies. His reticence in abandoning Southern religion altogether seems to confound his unyielding condemnation of it. This ambivalence warrants a reconsideration of the apparent absence of prophetic religion in Caldwell’s early fiction. Do his novels ever suggest the latent possibility of *disarticulating* the religious and political outlooks that became “synonymous and inseparable” in the twentieth century?

*Tobacco Road* (1932) revolves around the family of Jeeter Lester, a poor white tenant farmer. In the midst of economic depression, the Lesters are literally starving. Not only can Jeeter not afford to purchase seeds and farm equipment, but the small piece of land he tends has been so overfarmed that it is nearly infertile. Nevertheless, Jeeter is committed to staying on the land. By the end of the novel, almost all of Jeeter’s children have abandoned the farm. But even with no children to work as farmhands and no seeds to plant, Jeeter decides to burn the field so that it would be ready to plow. “Maybe God

will send some way to allow the growing of a crop,” he tells himself. That night, the wind blows embers from the field and Jeeter’s house catches on fire. The conspicuous absence of divine providence in this narrative defies more sentimental conceptions of the Bible Belt that affirm providence and are blind to the failures of the Church to serve the interests of the most vulnerable members of Southern society.

Clearly, Caldwell’s novels do not fit into the Agrarian paradigm. The grotesque spectacles of poverty he presents, however, are characteristic of the voyeuristic aspects of Southern Gothicism described by Susan Donaldson: “In story after story, the possibility of alternative gazes, alternative perspectives, alternative narratives, is raised repeatedly, often by underscoring the limitations of the collective gaze leveled upon those labeled as strange, marvelous, grotesque, and suffering” (581). Caldwell, his critics argue, exploits and reinforces this collective—and collectively ignorant—gaze by cashing in on the large market for depictions of Southern abnormality. At the same time, his works do suggest the possibility of alternative narratives and perspectives. The Agrarian gaze, for instance, only records Southern religion as one among many of the region’s integrated traditions that helped solidify Southern culture as an exceptional counterpoint to the industrial nation. Caldwell’s fiction, on the other hand, undermines such exceptionalism with pseudo-naturalist<sup>35</sup> representations of Southerners who, rather than being cordoned off and isolated from the effects of modernization, are products of an ever-changing and often cruel world.

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<sup>35</sup> While Caldwell’s fiction bears much in common with turn-of-the-century social realism, his condescending tone connotes a more satirical gaze than that of the ostensibly empirical narrators of naturalist fiction.

The moral depravity of the characters in *Tobacco Road* is admittedly shocking and ultimately dehumanizing, but the novel also suggests that behavioral depravity is largely determined by gross material deprivation. While Caldwell harmfully strips many of his characters of any sense of moral agency, he also implicates the white Church, among other regional institutions, in the abandonment of those who need saving more than anyone. He draws a direct parallel between material conditions and the moral economy of personal worth, which underlies the clear absence of traditional familial and communal values in the novel. In it, the value of people is as susceptible to economic forces—market demands, inflation, deflation, and so forth—as the value of the dollar. For instance, the grandmother in this novel has no sentimental value and is seen by her family as being “nothing more than a door-jam or a length of weather-boarding” (183). Because of the scarcity of food, “the old grandmother had been shoved outside the kitchen when she tried to come inside” (6). When she is accidentally run over by a car, her relatives drag her body, unceremoniously, to a nearby field and bury her, a blasphemous reappraisal of the central role of family values in Southern culture. By exploding the sacred bonds of blood in the families he portrays, Caldwell undercuts what King calls the “Southern family romance,” through which “[i]ndividual and regional identity, self-worth, and status were determined by family relationships,” with the “region being conceived as a vast metaphorical family, hierarchically organized and organically linked” (27). In the Bible Belt nostalgia I have discussed throughout this study, religion serves a similar purpose to that of the family, in that it buries dissent by falsely linking disparate classes of Southerners into one organic religious community. For that reason, we might

reasonably discuss the “Southern *religious* romance” as another literary trope that Caldwell’s fiction rejects.

In *Tobacco Road*, religion is far from the glue that binds Southern communities together. Neither is it a moral compass for individual characters. Instead, it is a resource that characters can use and repurpose. The main religious character is Sister Bessie, a woman preacher in her thirties who, in the beginning of the novel, tells Dude Lester, a teenager, that God had preordained their marriage. Bessie’s situation is never as dire as others in the novel. More resourceful than the starving Lesters, Bessie purchases a car so that she can expand her ministry as a traveling evangelist. Other depictions of rural Southern religion deflect religious experience away from the immediate material conditions of its adherents, as when O’Connor’s poor and uneducated Mrs. Greenleaf prays for the healing of divorced movie stars. Conversely, Bessie uses religion for her own personal and socioeconomic gain, often at the expense of others. Her evangelism also contradicts the sentimental vision of religion as a permanent fixture in Southern communities: “There was no church building to house Bessie’s congregation, nor was there an organized band of communicants to support her” (44). Driving from place to place to preach and pray, Sister Bessie creates the illusion of a cohesive religious network of families and communities, but her constant coming and going also suggests that modern Southern religion, for Caldwell, is only tenuously anchored to the material reality to which less resourceful Southerners like Jeeter seem fatalistically bound. Just as the Lesters’ unimaginable cruelty toward the grandmother defies the romance of the “organically linked” Southern family and community, Bessie’s industrious religion defies

the Southern religious romance of divine regional providence and an inherited Old Time religion.

Even these cursory observations suggest the viability and flexibility of this project's approach to rereading literary treatments of Southern religion in significantly broader and more comprehensive contexts. By looking beyond the narrow definitions provided by freeze-frame images of twentieth-century conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism in the South, we can better recognize and account for the dissonances, contradictions, and conflicts inhered by evangelicalism's shift from the margins to the center of life in the South. Of course, the countercultural impulses of earlier revivalism do not negate the need to scrutinize the failures and transgressions of latter-day Bible Belt religion. Nor do they prove that early Southern revivalism was a "truer" or more authentic brand of Protestantism. Foregrounding historical religious discrepancies, however, does provide a promising perspective that can improve our understanding of how certain incongruities between the past and present have been collectively forgotten in popular culture. This approach also enables us to better assess whether a reappearance or reemergence of such religious incongruities in the Southern literary imagination has gone unexamined due to our own narrow preconceptions of Southern religion.

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