

AMBIVALENT DEVOTION: RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN WOMEN'S FICTION

A Dissertation

by

SARAH L. PETERS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	David McWhirter
Committee Members,	Anne Morey
	Pamela Matthews
	Joan Wolf
Head of Department,	M. Jimmie Killingsworth

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## ABSTRACT

Ambivalent Devotion: Religious Imagination  
in Contemporary Southern Women's Fiction. (December 2009)

Sarah L. Peters, B.A., Henderson State University;

M.L.A., Henderson State University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. David McWhirter

Analyzing novels by Sheri Reynolds, Lee Smith, Barbara Kingsolver, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Sue Monk Kidd, I argue that these authors challenge religious structures by dramatizing the struggle between love and resentment that brings many women to the point of crisis but also inspires imaginative and generative processes of appropriation and revision, emphasizing not destination but process. Employing first-person narration in coming-of-age stories, Smith, Reynolds, and Kingsolver highlight the various narratives that govern the experiences of children born into religious cultures, including narratives of sexual development, gender identity, and religious conversion, to portray the difficulty of articulating female experience within the limited lexicon of Christian fundamentalism. As they mature into adulthood, the girl characters in these novels break from tradition to develop new consciousness by altering and adapting religious language, understood as open and malleable rather than authoritative and fixed.

Smith, Kidd, and Naylor incorporate the Virgin Mary and divine maternal figures from non-Christian traditions to restore the mother-daughter relationship that is eclipsed

by the Father and Son in Christian tradition. Identifying the female body as a site of spiritual knowledge, these authors present a metaphorical return to the womb that empowers their characters to embrace divine maternal love that transgresses the masculine symbolic order, displacing (but not necessarily destroying) the authority of God the Father and His human representatives.

Reynolds and Walker portray physical pain, central to the Christian image of crucifixion, as destroying the ability of women to speak, denying them subjectivity. Through transgressive sexual relationships infused with religious significance, these authors disrupt the Christian moral paradigm by presenting bodily pleasure as an alternative to the Christian valorization of sacrifice. The replacement of pain with pleasure inspires imaginative work that makes private spirituality shareable through artistic creation.

The novels I study present themes that also concern Christian and non-Christian feminist theologians: the development of feminine images of the divine, emphasis on immanence over transcendence, the apprehension of the divine in nature, and the necessity of challenging the reification of religious images and dualisms that undermine female subjectivity. I show the reciprocal relationship between fiction and theology, as theologians treat women's literature as sacred texts and fiction writers give life to abstract religious concepts through narrative.

## DEDICATION

To Rebekah and Annabelle, who are always remaking my world.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION:  
EVANGELICAL RELIGION AND LITERARY STUDIES

This dissertation analyzes the religious imagination of American women as it appears in novels by Lee Smith, Sheri Reynolds, Barbara Kingsolver, Gloria Naylor, Sue Monk Kidd, and Alice Walker. While imagination, like religion, is understood to be intensely private and invisible, the objects of imagination are shaped by social and material conditions. The artistic creations that are the artifacts of imagination, shared with others, make the invisible visible and the private social, much as the rituals, relics, architecture, and practices of religion make invisible belief visible and establish communities of people who share their understanding(s) of the divine. By religious imagination, I mean, as Paula M. Cooley has defined it, “imagination whose creativity is governed by and expressed through religious imagery; a person who exercises religious imagination may or may not be conventionally pious in relation to religious institutions” (5). Religion in twenty-first century America includes many different forms of traditional monotheistic religions, spiritualities that are not connected to any particular doctrine, and religious organizations such as Unitarian Universalist churches, which make no claims to belief in a supreme being or the human soul, features many people understand to be the core of religious belief. This diversity in the understanding of what

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This dissertation follows the style of *Publications of the Modern Language Association*.

constitutes religion or spirituality makes a definition of religion difficult to pin down in any useful way. While I will elaborate later on my approach to religion, one way in which I am limiting the topic is by situating my study in the specific context of Protestant Christianity in the American South, understood as a component of regional, and more importantly familial and communal, identity and culture, as well as of personal beliefs about ultimate meaning and reality that shape an individual's understanding of self and the world.

In a 1995 article published in *American Literature*, Jenny Franchot calls for Americanist literary scholars to increase their attention to religion as a primary object of study. While she notes that many works of literary criticism include treatments of religion, few have been willing to “engage intensively with the religious questions of the topics at hand *as religious questions*” (839 emphasis in original). Franchot further argues that those critics who take up religion frequently “silence” religious concerns by applying poststructuralist theories to “translat[e] the invisible into the vocabularies of sexuality, race, and class,” failing to confront the complexity of a belief system that “insist[s] upon a domain of the private that transcends cultural explication while claiming to produce culture in significant ways (840). Literary critics fell far behind historians, anthropologists, and art historians in their studies of religion, but many of those scholars also showed a resistance to take on contemporary Western culture, preferring to focus on religion in earlier historical periods or in non-Western cultures. Franchot finds that “the field of Black Atlantic studies is one of the very few contemporary locations for interesting work on religion,” suggesting that “a still potent

exoticism . . . partially motivates the engagement that distinguishes scholarship on early American and Black Atlantic spirituality . . . but the closer we get to contemporary Western traditions, the quieter the literary scholars become” (838).<sup>1</sup> The years that followed Franchot’s article saw an increase in articles, books, and dissertations confronting religion in American literature, which in turn led to essays considering the implications of a “turn to religion” in literary studies. More than a decade later, however, Lawrence Buell notes that “religio-centric explanations of the dynamics of cultural history” by literary scholars continue to lag behind the work of other humanists and that “literary history stands to profit from a closer engagement with religious studies” (“Religion on the American Mind” 33).

A factor in both the interest in and resistance to religion in literary studies is the relationship between private belief and the public sphere. Whether or not one believes that religion belongs always in the private domain, the reality is that religion in America has of late been thrust powerfully into the public. Every major party presidential candidate beginning with Jimmy Carter, including Barack Obama, has in the midst of the campaign publically professed Christian faith, and Democrats and Republicans on all levels have deliberately appealed to the religious values of Christian voters. This bipartisan appeal to religious ideals illustrates that the religious influence on public life

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<sup>1</sup> While I do take on contemporary fiction and contemporary American culture in this dissertation, my focus on the South as a region peculiarly marked by a more extreme form of Protestantism, including various forms of fundamentalism, carries with it some features of the exoticism to which Franchot refers. The South cast as “other” to the national identity of the United States allows the treatment of religion to be distanced from the experience of the reader/critic (even though this reader/critic has lived in the South and indeed attended Evangelical churches throughout much of her life). Over the course this dissertation, however, I do extend my analysis into the larger “mainstream” American culture as I also try to unpack some of the familiar caricatures of Southern religion. I will also argue in Chapter II that the authors themselves employ extreme, and therefore exotic, settings to intensify the religious elements of their stories and to make visible issues that might be missed in more subtle portrayals of American religion.

is not entirely a marginal and reactionary fundamentalist phenomenon—although that strain is certainly one of its more visible manifestations—but is also expressed in more liberal, progressive, and multi-vocal movements. The political action of groups like Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, both aligned with conservative Republicans, is familiar in its opposition to abortion rights, stem-cell research, and gay marriage. Leading up to the 2008 presidential election, however, the Republican alignment with Catholics and evangelical Christians was complicated by members of those denominations expressing support for Democratic plans for social programs, articulated in terms of Jesus’s care for the poor; groups like the evangelical Environmental Network, interpreting environmental concerns as the human obligation to care for God’s creation; and prominent pro-life Catholics voicing support for Barack Obama, arguing that Obama’s plans would decrease the need for abortions by improving conditions for the women most likely to consider abortion.<sup>2</sup> The ways in which private faith pervades the public sphere lead some scholars to recognize the importance of religion in the shaping of American culture, making it an important topic for critical analysis, while others resist bringing further attention to religion for fear that, as Simon During expresses, “the argument that religion needs to be taken more seriously in cultural critique and that it’s at work even where we don’t expect it, if widely accepted, will increase the amount of religion in the world” (876).

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Sullivan reported on the “battle for Catholic voters” in the 2008 election in *Time*. Among its missions, the Evangelical Environmental Network lists on its website that it “provides theological and spiritual guidance on Christian responsibility in the light of biblical teaching on the care of creation and the reality of modern environmental degradation” and “organizes and participates in public education and advocacy campaigns and declarations that relate to the spiritual and moral aspects of public policies on energy and the environment.”

During articulates his reluctance to “take religion seriously” in response to Bill Brown’s 2005 article in *PMLA*, “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory),” in which Brown argues that our theories of secular postmodernity are informed by an internalized religiosity. In his response, During expresses his “personal disquiet” with Brown’s analysis, observing that “there are surprisingly thin lines between (1) arguing (no doubt correctly) that, despite the Enlightenment, secularity remains one small (if powerful) province of global culture; and (2) not being secular oneself; and (3) being religious” (876). Sparked in part by the constant blurring between the private and public in religious belief and practice, scholars are actively debating the validity of the distinctions between the secular and non-secular. In a 2007 special issue of *New Literary History*, Michael W. Kaufmann, Kevin Seidel, and Tracy Fessenden interrogate “a narrative of secularization that traces the gradual transformation of [the literary studies] profession that was once more religious into one that is now largely secular” (Kaufmann 607). If we examine the relationship between the religious and secular as it constructs our identities as literary scholars as well as citizens of a liberal democracy, Fessenden contends, “then religion need no longer be ignored, explained away, or given undue deference” (636). A component of the analysis of the religious and the secular is the recognition of a “postsecular” age, motivated by frustration with “the failed promises of modernization” and exemplified by “the clash of civilizations in the third millennium” (Braidotti 2). Broadly defined, postsecularism includes an increase in fundamentalism in monotheistic religions across the globe and a disruption of the opposition between private belief system and political citizenship valued in a secular

culture. Not confined to institutionalized religion, postsecularism also includes an increase in less dogmatic forms of spirituality, cultures of “seeking,” as sociologists of religion Leigh Eric Schmidt and Robert Wuthnow have described them. Following the lines of inquiry taken up by analysts of secularization narratives, scholars of postsecularism examine not only overtly religious/spiritual activity but also the religious dimensions of popular culture, such as celebrity iconography, and the “faith” implicit in the “belief systems” of “reason, science, and technology” (Braidotti 11).<sup>3</sup>

Such diverse understandings of what can be considered religious shape how critics read religious elements in literary texts. In a 2006 special issue, *Religion and Literature* published a group of articles coming out of “The American Literature and Religion Seminar,” a five-year project that “gather[ed] scholars from a variety of religious backgrounds for the concentrated study of the intersection of religion and the literature of the United States from Emerson to the present” (Lundin 1). This group illustrates how critics’ different concepts of religion play out in literary analysis. Outlining a narrative of secularization, Denis Donoghue argues that “modern American literature is a substitute for religion, but a substitute in which the original has been absorbed” (35). Specifically, Donoghue claims that “Hawthorne replaced God with nature and community, nature as an Emersonian substitute for God in His notionally benign aspects, community as a substitute for Him in his stringency, promulgator of the Ten Commandments” (40). In Donoghue’s assessment, “while the ‘cultural

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this kind of approach in literary criticism is Norman W. Jones’s *Gay and Lesbian Historical Fiction: Sexual Mystery and Post-Secular Narrative*. Jones argues that discourses of homosexuality and Christianity, while commonly understood as oppositional, share important narrative topoi, including stories of transformation in the form of coming out and conversion and the development of chosen, non-biological communities.

unconscious' in America is religious, the culture so far as it is conscious is secular" (35). Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood likewise consider American literature almost entirely secular, starting not with the assumption that American culture is secular but that Christianity "has so fully identified itself with the American project that our artists have had little cause to heed any unique and distinctly Christian witness in the churches" (61). The privatization and individualization of religion, they argue, has led to a "nominalized and accommodationist kind of Christianity" that results in an absence of "art that gives imaginative life to the church as the one transformative community which, by overcoming the triumphalist lure, is able to reconcile enemies and thus to empower their mutual resistance against the coercions of state and culture alike" (66, 72). With such stringent criteria, they identify only one writer, Flannery O'Connor, and one specific text, Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, as substantively Christian. In his response to Donoghue, also directed toward Hauerwas and Wood, Lawrence Buell criticizes the focus on institutionalized religion, asking, "Why shouldn't the religious be identified mainly if not exclusively with the arenas of moral or spiritual inquiry and practice rather than with theologic belief or church affiliation?" ("American Literature and/as Spiritual Inquiry" 57). Buell concludes with the suggestion that "Emerson, Hawthorne, and James (both William and Henry) will likely continue to resonate, spiritually as well as aesthetically" for Americans who are "spiritual seekers engaged in individual life pilgrimages that take on resonance, depth, rigor to the degree that seeking and striving become robust and sustaining in proportion to their being grounded in disciplined spiritual practice, which may or may not involve close

allegiance to a sect or creed” (59). While Donoghue, Hauerwas, and Wood define religion in terms of doctrinal commitments, Buell accepts a much broader sense of religion that is strengthened, not diminished, by American individualism. Hence, where Donoghue sees little evidence of religion in American literature, Hauerwas and Wood even less, Buell understands the American literary tradition as a series of individual spiritual quests and, as such, replete with works of religious imagination.

In addition to disagreements over what can be called religious, a kind of territorial conflict between professed believers and those who do not hold (or do not publically express) religious beliefs themselves has led to questions of who can adequately analyze religious elements in literature. The call for attention to religion in literary studies seems to neglect the fact that journals such as *Christianity and Literature*, *Religion and Literature*, and *Theology and Literature* have long recognized the relevance of religion to literary criticism. The turn to religion that Franchot calls for and subsequent critics have observed represents an increase in religion-focused work outside of those organizations. Susan M. Felch notes that while “twenty years ago, participants at the MLA would have been hard pressed to find serious discussions of religion outside of panels organized by the Division on Literature and Religion or by the Conference on Christianity and Literature,” recent MLA conferences have included dozens of panels devoted to topics on religion and literature (213). Essays on increased interest in religion have hinted that earlier critics needed the corrective influence of a more diverse and objective (and by implication more legitimate) body of scholarship. Even as Franchot calls for religion to be taken seriously by critics, she assures readers



that the works she cites as examples contain none of the “hagiographical or polemical impulses that used to characterize some work on religion” (838). Similarly, Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, in their article “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern Studies,” warn critics that while their work must be done respectfully without “a smugly rational stance,” they should also not take on religion “the way that a much earlier and more naive generation of Whiggish ethnocentrists or Catholic apologists did, with belief systems governing the selection of evidence, the choice of texts deemed worthy of attention, and the results of interpretation” (182). Even as these scholars insist that religion is a crucial object of inquiry in literary studies, they indicate not so subtly that those who hold religious beliefs themselves have failed in the past to produce serious scholarship.

The winter 2009 issue of *Christianity and Literature*, following a similarly-themed seminar at the 2007 MLA convention, was devoted to “explor[ing] ways in which Christian scholars could participate in the turn to religion,” implying, as Tiffany Eberle Kriner points out, that “those assumed to already be comprising the turn” are “scholars who do not define themselves as Christian believers or who expressly avoid relating their religious commitments to scholarship” (Felch 214, Eberle 267). Eberle interprets the conflict between religious and non-religious scholars as a kind of mimetic rivalry, as theorized by Rene Girard. Non-religious scholars, in their efforts to approach religion as religion, “not to be read solely as functions of other forces (e.g. race, class, and gender),” attempt to “acquire or imitate the experience of believers . . . without necessarily believing” (271). Eberle asserts the need for Christian scholars to develop

models that value Christian identity and belief as a valid interpretive framework (as in Liam Corley's argument that the Christian practice of devotional Bible reading can be meaningfully and usefully applied in literary analysis), but that do so in non-combative, relational ways founded in Christian love of others. Christian critic Harold K. Bush, Jr. makes a similar argument in his 2001 article, "The Outrageous Idea of a Christian Literary Studies: Prospects for the Future and a Meditation on Hope." Citing prominent African American and white scholars of African American literature as evidence that excellent scholarship has been conducted by critics who do and do not "shar[e] a particular subjectivity" with their objects of study, Bush argues that while "some of the best work on religious impulses in literary studies has come from those not religiously committed themselves . . . in a postmodern environment which claims to welcome all viewpoints and all identities, it becomes theoretically impossible" to exclude Christian scholars as producers of serious and legitimate analysis (88).

I understand religion as a complex and dynamic exchange among cultural contexts and subjective private experience. Religion cannot be understood exclusively as the texts, symbols, rituals, and doctrines of a particular faith, as these artifacts interact with the lived experiences of individuals. Neither can individual religious experience—the phenomena of revelation or conversion, for example—be understood as completely removed from the cultural contexts, symbols, and practices through which a person articulates that experience. To be studied responsibly, religion must be treated as a separate category from race, gender, sexuality, and class, but scholars must also take seriously the extent to which all of those categories of experience are critical to the way

that people have developed religious beliefs and practices. Just as Alice Walker, as she introduced the concept of womanism in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, contends that the elevation of race or gender to the exclusion of the other has occluded the ways in which the narratives of race *and* gender shape the experiences of African American women, the elevation of race, gender, sexuality, or class has the potential to mask the importance of religion in human experience (and vice-versa). The study of literature, which is, after all, the study of the artistic artifacts of human creation and, as such, necessarily social and cultural, need not defer to belief in God nor reject it. Scholars for whom belief in God is central to their understanding of the world and their work as critics must approach texts as objects of material culture; the belief in an ultimate reality that transcends culture does not erase the fact that literary texts are created within traditions shaped by religious and secular influences that must be part of the interpretive framework. Scholars who do not believe that an ultimate reality exists free of human culture can still approach belief as belief by recognizing “the extent to which the social construction of reality constructs what is genuinely real” (Cooley 28). The effort to explicate religious experience or religious imagination need not be understood as “explaining away” religious belief if scholars on both sides (and in the middle, as I find myself) acknowledge that the representation of religion in literary texts is a cultural activity informed by multiple secular and non-secular discourses and that belief, for many, is experienced as very real indeed.

In my project, I examine the ways in which people “live in, through, and against all the religious idioms available to them in culture,” appropriating and transforming

religious discourses in response to particular circumstances within particular communities (Orsi 8). To that end, I begin with an examination of religion in the South, in its historical and contemporary manifestations. As religious diversity rapidly increases throughout the United States and debate continues about whether there is still something distinctive that we can call The South, the concept of a uniquely Southern religion remains in the minds of Americans a constant factor in social and political activity and a frequent element in the literature of Southern writers. Decades after Flannery O'Connor's backwoods prophets, Southern fiction writers offer snake handlers, missionaries, preacher's wives, and gospel singers as representatives and explorers of the still "Christ-haunted" South (O'Connor 818). In an interview with Susan Ketchin, novelist Lee Smith describes herself as a woman who was obsessed with religion as a child yet avoids it in most aspects of her life now. She offers two reasons for her resistance to religion: first, discomfort with the way that fundamentalist churches subordinate women, and second, the fear of being "engulfed" in religion the way she was as a child. Yet she writes about religion in many of her novels. Writing, for her, is "a way to get in touch with that [religious] intensity, a way of getting in touch with and staying true to me" (51). Articulating her ambivalence through fictional characters allows her to create a language through which she can address her own religiosity and spirituality while remaining within the "boundaries" that she fears she would lose were she to participate in religion again herself (47). She describes religion as a primary marker of a person's identity within her home town of Grundy, Virginia. "When some family was mentioned, somebody'd say, well, they're Methodist, or they're Presbyterian,

or they go to So-and-So's church, or whatever. In the South, if you grew up in the time when we did in a small community, you were exposed to it intensely as a part of daily life" (Ketchin 52). The novels that I analyze in this dissertation are written by Southern women who have had varying degrees of involvement with religion. Each of the authors in this study has a diverse body of work featuring many different characters, settings, and themes; none of them writes exclusively about religion. But each of them at some point has turned to religion as a topic of inquiry and has depicted characters overtly struggling with the church, the Bible, and God. Through fiction, these women confront and explore the religion so intertwined with their regional environment, community, and very often family identity and individual spirituality.

The most prevalent common element of these works is a profound and even agonizing ambivalence toward religious traditions and toward God. Many times the characters in these novels express feelings of reverence and love for the church, desire for prayer and communication with God, and great spiritual passion within and outside of religious services and rituals; at the same time, they express fear, anger, and resentment. Gracie, the narrator of Smith's *Saving Grace*, for example, repeatedly tells the reader that she hates Jesus for forcing her family to move around with her itinerant preacher father. She is awed, however, when she sees a little girl healed by prayer and prays in earnest to Jesus when her brother and a family friend are sick. Ninah, of Reynolds' *The Rapture of Canaan*, is afraid when she sees her sister in church speaking in tongues, partly because she is afraid of being possessed by the spirit in that way and partly because she is afraid that it will never happen to her. Celie of Walker's *The Color*

*Purple* tries deliberately to stop believing in God but finds it impossible because, as she tells her friend, “All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did . . . But deep in my heart I care about God” (175). Beginning as tormenting doubt, ambivalence becomes a cultivated virtue as the authors use it as the impetus for linguistic experimentation, creative interaction with religious concepts and symbols, and revision and reimagining of traditional religion. As the authors dramatize female spiritual introspection and public and private challenges of religion, the process of acknowledging and expressing ambivalence stands as a mark of positive growth, whether it leads to rejection, revision, or reconciliation.

While it is certainly not the only religion or the only form of Christianity practiced in the South, evangelical Christianity dominates and pervades Southern culture. Noting that “evangelicals struggled for many decades to prosper among whites in the South,” Christine Leigh Heyrman asserts in her history of the development of the Bible Belt that evangelicalism as it developed into a major Southern institution was influenced by the powerful investment in social hierarchy, with white men at the top, white women and children below them, and African slaves at the bottom, that largely cemented the region’s identity before and after the Civil War (6). When evangelicalism trickled down from New England in the nineteenth century, most of its early adherents were women and slaves, converted by itinerant preachers and missionaries. They filled the pews and were responsible for most of the work that went into developing and sustaining new churches. Gradually, as the leaders of these churches sought to attract white men into the congregation, and husbands and masters complained about the

attention and time that their wives and slaves gave to the churches, the structure and doctrine of Southern evangelical churches began to reflect the social order of the dominant culture (76). Churches were segregated and sermons began to emphasize the subordination of women to men. The responsibilities of women to their husbands and children were glorified as the highest priorities of an ideal Christian wife (160). As these changes swept through Southern religious culture, white male support of the churches increased, helping evangelicalism to move rapidly through the region as more churches were built and dependence on itinerant preachers decreased. Motivated largely by competing interpretations of the biblical stance on slavery, with Northern evangelicals championing abolition and Southern evangelicals justifying slavery as biblical, the largest denominations in the South began to break from their Northern organizations to form specifically Southern denominations of Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians (Ahlstrom 702). As Southerners differentiated themselves from the North, a Southern religion helped to solidify and support the concept of Southern exceptionalism while Southern churches accommodated and justified white Southern social values and hierarchy.

Early African American religion was intertwined with white Southern evangelicalism but in many ways developed separately. The fervor of evangelical missionaries in the North and South led to the conversion of most African Americans into evangelicalism rather than Catholicism or other Protestant denominations. As abolitionism became a greater threat to slavery, “the benefits of Christianization became an argument in the justification of slavery” (702). Slave owners claimed that they were

responsible for the salvation of their slaves, who might not have the opportunity to hear the Word of God were they left on their own without proper guidance, while ministers preached to slaves about the virtues of being obedient servants and the rewards awaiting them in heaven. However, proscriptions against assembly and literacy severely limited the religious instruction that slaves received (703). These limitations led to the development of an “invisible institution” of slave religion in the South, grown from secret meetings in which slaves drew on their knowledge of religion and the Bible and their African heritage to develop religious communities that helped them to endure the conditions of slavery (Battle 57). In his analysis of the Africanist elements of African American Christianity, Michael Battle argues that the emotional singing and shouting in evangelicalism

easily meshed with the practices of traditional African spirituality.

Enslaved Africans found Methodist and Baptist services appealing because the emphasis on spiritual conversion translated well into the African belief in the dynamic world of the spirit. In this sense, early revivalistic Christianity served to link an African past with a North American present. (61)

The concurrent development of white and black evangelicalism in the South led to “intermingled streams of folk piety with distinctive Baptist and Methodist elements apparent in the religious life of each race” (Ahlstrom 703).

Religion in the South has certainly not remained static, but evangelicalism continues to be the dominant religion in the South and a dominant characteristic of



regional identity. For many in the South, this particular kind of religion is a pervasive part of the environment, its influence reaching into and affecting the ways and beliefs even of other religious denominations. Living in the South, one must contend with Southern religion whether one considers oneself part of it or not. Southern evangelicalism is characterized by “four common convictions”: the Bible as the sole authority of belief and practice, each person’s direct access to God, an emphasis on individual morality, and loosely structured, spontaneous worship (Hill 1-2). In its prescription of gender roles, the emphasis on biblical inerrancy, the belief that the Bible is factually true, in many ways establishes gender as a central aspect of institutional and personal religious experience.<sup>4</sup> The Gospel of John begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This verse declares language crucial to understanding God and the universe, and for evangelicals, the Bible is the primary means through which one may access the truths that God has granted to humanity. In establishing doctrines of gender roles, many theologians and denominational leaders refer to Paul’s letters in the New Testament. A commonly cited passage calls for the submission of wives to husbands:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the

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<sup>4</sup> Theologian Gary Dorrien notes that the belief in biblical inerrancy is the subject of debate among evangelicals. Even among fundamentalists who uphold the belief in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God as one of their key principles, the variety of biblical versions and translations presents the complicated problem of determining which versions are accurate. Fundamentalists agree, however, that the original scriptural texts are completely without error and factually true. Other evangelical thinkers have developed what Dorrien calls an “infallible teaching model,” which holds that scripture is infallible in “the affirmation of its message,” which is “variously construed as all matters of faith and practice, or all matters pertaining to salvation, or the overall message of scripture, or the essential message of scripture” (10). The consistency among these various approaches to scripture is the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and that it should be the primary source of religious knowledge and spiritual guidance.

church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

Proponents of male headship and female submission, such as members of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), interpret this verse as a clear and unambiguous commandment from God for wives to defer final to their husbands decision making and spiritual leadership, setting up what they term “complementarian” (as opposed to “hierarchical” or “egalitarian”) gender roles (Hankins 120).<sup>5</sup> Differences in scriptural interpretation exist, however, even among evangelicals who share beliefs in biblical inerrancy. Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) insist that scripture must be interpreted in its historical context and as part of a holistic and thematic reading of the entire Bible.<sup>6</sup> In matters of gender roles, members of the CBE claim that the Bible as a whole puts forward a strong message of equality. They support their call for egalitarian marriage by focusing on Ephesians 5:21, which commands husbands and wives to mutually submit to one another (Hankins 121).

Not a monolithic structure, evangelicalism in the South encompasses many different denominations with various approaches to scriptural interpretation. While some churches do emphasize and insist on gender hierarchy, many others are sensitive to

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<sup>5</sup> The CBMW was founded in 1987 by evangelical pastors and scholars who were concerned about the influence of feminism on church members. CBMW members believe “that men and women are equal in the image of God, but maintain complementary differences in role and function. In the home, men lovingly are to lead their wives and family as women intelligently are to submit to the leadership of their husbands. In the church, while men and women share equally in the blessings of salvation, some governing and teaching roles are restricted to men” (*The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*).

<sup>6</sup> The CBE was founded in 1988 in response to the CBMW’s statements. The CBE characterizes the complementarian argument as a “shallow biblical premise used by organizations and mission groups to exclude the gifts of women.” CBE members advocate gender and racial equality in churches, missions, and families as a fundamental biblical truth (*CBE International*).

different social realities and choose to minimize or avoid these elements of scripture in regular church activities, lessons, and sermons. But such measures may do little to prevent girls and women from internalizing the words/Word as evidence of female inferiority. In her memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, novelist Sue Monk Kidd describes the “feminine wound” that results from masculine language and gender hierarchy in church:

And what does a girl, who is forming her identity, do with all the scriptures admonishing women to submission and silence? Having them “explained away” as the product of an ancient time does not entirely erase her unease. She also experiences herself missing from pronouns in scripture, hymns, and prayers. And most of all, as long as God “himself” is exclusively male, she will experience the otherness, the lessness of herself; all the pious talk in the world about females being equal to males will fail to compute in the deeper places inside her. (29)

Kidd describes her own experiences as a girl seeing only male deacons ordained in her church and hearing her Sunday School teachers and pastors teach female submission as a virtue, which led to her own resentment for being born female. Gender in such a setting not only defines roles in religious institutions and family life but also invades a person’s individual experience of God. Even as patriarchy and sexism have become less visible and less acceptable in the United States, including the South, religion remains a place where patriarchy is fundamental and overt, and therefore, a place where gender identity must be constantly negotiated and interrogated. Because language is sacred in this

religion, which reveres not only the Bible but also sermons, testimonies, and lyrical hymns as transmitters of religious truth, language is often the primary means by which gender roles are defined, questioned, and adapted.

Gender roles are articulated and enforced most firmly by the largest Protestant denomination not only in the South but in the entire United States, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).<sup>7</sup> Deliberately resisting the social changes around them, the SBC continues to reiterate a belief in the subordinate position of women. In 1998, the Baptist Faith and Message, the official statement of SBC doctrine, was amended to state that women should “graciously submit” to their husbands. A 2000 amendment explicitly states that the office of pastor is reserved for men only, denying the autonomy of Baptist churches to affirm whomever they choose as their pastor. At the 2008 convention, a resolution was sent to committee to disallow affiliation by churches with a female pastor, harshly enforcing the 2000 amendment (Knox). Recently, the gender segregation sought by fundamentalists in the SBC has reached beyond a woman’s right to preach. In 2005 Sheri Klouda, then a Hebrew language teacher in the School of Theology at SBC’s Southwestern Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, was denied tenure because the administration, under president Paige Patterson, claimed that it was scripturally inappropriate for a woman to teach a man. Klouda filed suit against the seminary, which maintained its stance even though it agreed that she was not preaching or acting in a pastoral function. A U.S. district judge dismissed her claim on the grounds that as a

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<sup>7</sup> A 2007 report by Lifeway Christian Resources counts over 16 million SBC members and approximately 350,000 new baptisms a year.

private religious institution, the seminary had the right to discriminate based on gender (Hodges).

Women's ordination as ministers is a long-standing controversy in Southern churches. More moderate denominations, including the United Methodists, Evangelical Lutherans, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) do ordain women ministers, and the number of female ordinations is rising (Lyerly 114). The women who serve as pastors in these denominations, however, often meet resistance in their communities. While female pastors might attract those who feel disenfranchised from conservative denominations, these leaders can also find it difficult to develop working relationships with pastors of more conservative churches in their communities (Norman, Barclay, and Hardesty 19). Moreover, the issue of women's ordination has actually caused major denominations to break apart. The Presbyterian Church in America, for example, was formed when 260 churches withdrew from the Presbyterian Church (USA) in protest of the ordination of women. Interestingly, this split has occurred in the other direction, as well. While the Presbyterian split represented a conservative faction breaking off from the "liberalizing" main denomination, the staunch stance against women's ordination by the fundamentalist leadership of the SBC motivated many churches to organize the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) (Lippy 125). Despite increases in the number of women ordained as ministers and enrolled in theological seminaries, female pastors in the South remain the exception.

Although they are often excluded from certain leadership positions, women outnumber men in evangelical churches, and women's work is integral to the functions

of church life and evangelism. Women have carved out substantial spaces, called the “woman’s sphere” by Bill J. Leonard and the “parallel church” by Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, for their own religious work (Leonard 306, Lyerly 114). Women’s missionary societies, several of them including the United Methodist Women and the Women’s Missionary Union of the SBC originating in the nineteenth century, have large numbers of members with governing bodies separate from male denominational leadership. In these groups, women raise money, publish literature, and train missionaries, providing service essential to the denominations to which they are connected. These groups also provide a space for developing female friendships and support networks. Some women have reached individual prominence among evangelicals by appealing to their positions as pastors’ wives. Presbyterian Jani Ortlund and Baptist Dorothy Patterson, both conservative pastors’ wives who endorse traditional gender roles including women’s submission, “speak to other women from a position of privilege . . . while emphasizing the ‘servanthood’ of women” (Norman, Barclay, and Hardesty 20). Billy Graham’s daughter Anne Graham Lotz manages AnGeL Ministries, through which she delivers not sermons but “messages of Biblical exposition” in books, DVDs, and live events (Lotz’s brother Franklin Graham inherited control of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association) (Lotz). From those positions of power by association, Ortlund, Patterson, and Lotz have created their own independent ministry programs directed toward women.

In addition to understanding and navigating gender expectations within the context of a church, women who are adherents of traditional Protestant Christianity must also work to reconcile their religious beliefs with their secular lives and their individual

families. As I have noted, competing strands of evangelical discourse on gender roles within the family indicate that at least some evangelicals believe in “mutual submission” of husband and wife to one another, advocating egalitarian marriage as biblically sound. In his study of evangelical marriage advice books, John P. Bartkowski observes a minority (but growing) trend of mutual submission advocates amid a majority that calls for wifely submission (399). In her interviews of evangelical couples, Sally K. Gallagher and Christian Smith find that in their practical lives, evangelical men and women are more likely to occupy some area between wifely submission and mutual submission, which manifests in a “symbolic traditionalism” and “pragmatic egalitarianism” (217). In this practice, male headship is understood as a “trump card” but one that is hardly ever played. In other words, a man as symbolic head of the family has the responsibility of making the final decisions, but he understands that it benefits his family to consult his wife, respect her opinion, and come to a joint decision (222). This pragmatic egalitarianism extends also to shared child care and work outside the home, but the symbolic traditionalism allows families to maintain a “distinctive subcultural identity” as evangelical Christians (229).<sup>8</sup>

While the religious community constructs gender roles based on leaders’ interpretations of scripture, the range of interpretations and applications of these roles in

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<sup>8</sup> In later studies, Gallagher finds similar mixed reactions to feminism. While she finds very few respondents who are entirely supportive or entirely opposed to feminism, most appreciate the positive progress feminists have made while expressing concern that feminists “foster excessive individualism and personal choice at the expense of commitment to family” (“Where Are the Anti-Feminist Evangelicals?” 469). Gallagher speculates that the negative response to feminism comes largely from conservative media which “provides a particular vocabulary for describing and responding to feminism” (470). She attributes the continued marginalization of evangelical feminism, which seeks to employ biblical beliefs as the foundation for egalitarianism, to this socially constructed suspicion of feminism in general (“The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism” 231).

church and family life illustrates in part the possibility for individualized religious consciousness within evangelicalism. The centrality of the Bible in evangelical beliefs demands an active engagement with the scriptures to draw out specific ways in which scripture can be applied to life. Certainly many voices contribute to this project, including large denominational bodies, media personalities like Pat Robertson and James Dobson, authors like those whom Bartowski studies, and pastors of individual churches. Part of this responsibility also lies on the shoulders of the individual believer. This individual responsibility is emphasized in the evangelical belief that each person has direct access to God and undergoes a private, individual salvation experience. This belief has the potential to empower believers to seek out religious truth independent of specific denominational structures through their own engagement with the divine. Mary Farrell Bednarowski describes “an emphasis on the immanence—that is, the indwelling, of the sacred”—as a major common theme in American women’s religious writing. Cooley argues that “provided that the disciplines involved are not ridiculously elaborate and obsessive, spirituality or the cultivation of piety can have a democratizing effect by ultimately shifting authority for the adherent from institutions and their representatives directly to his or her right relations with what is understood to be ultimately real” (13). The testimony of individual seekers who share with other believers their personal salvation stories is a common feature of evangelical worship services and mission work, and this narration of religious experience, this kind of story-telling, is open to women.

Religious narrative, beginning, of course, with biblical stories and parables and including personal conversion stories, stories of revelations, and didactic morality tales



within sermons and Sunday School lessons, is an important feature of evangelical religion although the church has not always been open to fictional narrative. Early evangelical leaders in England and the United States discouraged fiction reading because it had the potential to introduce dangerous ideas and emotions to church members. An 1867 collection of essays by American evangelical leaders, for example, warns that

the Christian religion addresses itself both to the mind and the heart, and whatever affects these unfavorably must obstruct its progress. Novels do not call into exercise the memory and reasoning or reflective powers of the mind, but tend to arouse and gratify a morbid craving for excitement, which is always favorable to vigorous mental exertion. (“Novel-Reading” 70)

The author calls for ministers to preach against novel-reading and for parents to forbid their children to read fiction just as they would forbid them to “associate with persons of vile character” (71). Charles Reagan Wilson attributes the resistance to the development of a book culture in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South to a similar distrust of literature, which presented a threat to “maintaining racial, religious, and regional consensus, through orthodoxies that should not be questioned” (113). While a general suspicion and avoidance of books is no longer a common feature in mainstream evangelical religion, evidence of a persistent caution appears in disputes over public school textbooks and literary reading assignments and the trend of homeschooling among the most conservative families who wish to limit their children’s exposure to

ideas that contradict their religious beliefs. These attitudes do not reflect a disdain for books or fiction per se but rather an understanding of books as powerful.

Even when cautioning church members to be wary of what they read, evangelicals have long recognized the usefulness of media for evangelism and mobilization. In his study of evangelical influence on the development of American media, Quentin J. Schultze observes that “evangelicals have always kept the faith partly by giving it away through every available medium” (24). Recognizing the power of books not just to endanger their faith but also to promote and enrich it, evangelicals embraced printing and began establishing their own printing houses in the American colonies (Blodgett 14). Evangelical publishing is now a multi-million dollar business, and a substantial portion of their publications are, indeed, works of fiction. Evangelical fiction writers and publishers, printing books by and for evangelicals, are, as Jan Blodgett describes them, “purposeful gatekeepers creating specific images of an evangelical universe” (1). Writing in multiple genres of mystery, romance, adventure, and biblical retellings, evangelical authors work within conventions of familiar non-religious fiction but they also provide readers “a means *through* which they can achieve spiritual sustenance,” as Lynn S. Neal finds in her interviews with readers of evangelical romance novels. The popularity of evangelical fiction, however, is not always contained within the community for which it was written. The wildly popular *Left Behind* novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, based on a specifically evangelical interpretation of the second coming of Christ, has appeared on mainstream bestseller lists and is widely available in bookstores. A more interesting case is the recent

bestseller William Paul Young's *The Shack*. Published by an independent press created for the purpose of publishing this book, *The Shack* tells the story of a man who meets three humans representing the Christian trinity, two of whom are women.<sup>9</sup> The novel has been the center of controversy, even inspiring books arguing for or against the theological credibility of the book, but the most telling aspect of its reception is that not only has it made both Christian and mainstream best-seller lists but it is also sold on the shelves of Lifeway Christian Bookstores, the retail arm of the conservative Southern Baptist publisher. The Christian community has embraced this book, controversy and all. The success among Christian readers of a book that encourages them to imagine multiple images of God—both male and female and of various races—indicates that even in a conservative sub-culture that takes reading to be a serious religious enterprise, many are open to diverse concepts of God and divergent understandings of the human relationship with God.

The novels that I analyze here are not “Christian fiction,” although as I have attempted to show the distinction between religious and secular fiction is not always clear. Rather, the novels I discuss are the works of authors who take religious culture as their setting and address questions of religious belief and practice. Fiction writing provides a vehicle for exploring religious conflicts, imagining transgression and its benefits and consequences, experimenting with religious language, and envisioning new forms of relationships with family, the community, the church, and God. Flannery

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<sup>9</sup> On the website of Windblown Media, publishers of *The Shack*, the founders explain that they started the company because secular publishers resisted such an overtly religious book but Christian publishers found it too controversial and wanted to “dull its edgy side.”

O'Connor observed that the South's wide-spread familiarity with the Bible and the pervasiveness of Christianity in the region provides a common language and a shared respect for mystery on which to base discussion and representation of religion as well as a fundamental way of understanding the world (859). The authors in this study work within the same shared language and knowledge and use that discourse to present the problems of reconciling religious tradition with changing social realities and personal experience and to reshape religious traditions.

The arguments advanced in two recent books on religion in contemporary American literature are useful for contextualizing my study. In *Recalling Religions: Resistance, Memory, and Cultural Revision in Ethnic Women's Literature*, Peter Kerry Powers argues that ethnic religious traditions are carriers of cultural memory that connect women to their ethnic communities. These traditions, however, may be restrictive or even dangerous, especially for women. In his analyses of the works of Cynthia Ozick, Alice Walker, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston, Powers shows how women writers of various ethnicities approach religious traditions as hybrid forms, allowing them to retain important community connections while also adapting to contemporary American culture, developing a position in relation to their religious heritage that lies somewhere between acquiescence and abandonment.

Constructing a theory of postsecular narratives in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John A. McClure analyzes novels by Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Michael Ondaatje. Postsecular narratives "trace the turn of secular-

minded characters back toward the religious” but not toward familiar authoritative religious institutions (3). Instead, these characters arrive at a middle ground characterized by “incompleteness and instability” (4). Disenchanted with secular values, they develop spiritual alternatives to secularity that recognize forces of mystery and wonder in the world but do not adhere to dogmatic systems of belief. As in the texts that McClure covers, the characters in the texts I analyze here come to find their ways of living troubling and even dangerous, and they seek out alternative ways of defining themselves and their places in the world.

The narratives of seeking and transforming in these novels take their starting point not in a secularized culture, as in the novels in McClure’s study, but in the religious culture of the South. Their journeys, however, take them to similar positions of uncertainty and flux. The lack of firm, static definitions of ultimate reality leaves the structures of both religious and secular culture (not necessarily conceived as separable realms) open to questions and challenges, destabilizing the dominant discourses. Just as Powers argues that ethnic women authors understand religious traditions as malleable forms, the authors in my study experiment with secular and religious values to challenge the hegemonic religious culture. Creating hybrid forms of spirituality, these authors seek out ways of being that afford women greater subjectivity.

In the following chapters I show that the authors I study challenge religious structures through a recognition of the human agents shaping definitions of the divine. These realizations invite creative engagements with religious discourses and affirm a search for spiritual awareness not confined to particular institutions. Inflected with

strong ties to family and community as well as personal spiritual desire, these works dramatize the struggle between love and resentment that brings many women to the point of crisis but also inspires imaginative and generative processes of appropriation and revision. These narratives emphasize not destination but process. In Chapter II, “Born into the Word: Girl Narrators and Religious Discourse,” I show how Lee Smith, Sheri Reynolds, and Barbara Kingsolver employ first-person narration in coming-of-age stories to dramatize the process of developing a religious consciousness separate from that of family and community. By highlighting the various narratives that govern the experiences of children born into religious cultures, including narratives of sexual development, gender identity, and religious conversion, these authors portray the difficulty of articulating female experience within the limited lexicon of Christian fundamentalism. Once they begin to recognize these narratives as human-created constructions, these girl characters begin the process of breaking from traditions to develop new consciousness by altering and adapting religious language, understood as open and malleable rather than authoritative and fixed. In Chapter III, “Return to the Womb: Restoring the Mother-Daughter Bond,” I demonstrate how Smith, Sue Monk Kidd, and Gloria Naylor incorporate the Virgin Mary as well as divine maternal figures from non-Christian and non-Western traditions to restore the mother-daughter relationship that is eclipsed by the Father and Son in Christian tradition. Identifying the female body as a potential site of spiritual knowledge, these authors present a metaphorical return to the womb that empowers their characters to integrate a sense of divine maternal love into their religious consciousness. This motherly love, felt through

non-verbal, sensorial, or semiotic communication, transgresses the masculine symbolic order, displacing (but not necessarily destroying) the authority of God the Father and His human representatives. In Chapter IV, "Moving into the World: From Pain to Creation," I illustrate how Reynolds and Alice Walker portray physical pain, central to the Christian image of crucifixion, destroying the ability of women to speak, denying them subjectivity. Through transgressive sexual relationships infused with religious significance, these authors disrupt the Christian moral paradigm by presenting bodily pleasure as a spiritually enriching alternative to the Christian valorization of sacrifice. The replacement of pain with pleasure also inspires imaginative work that the characters then share through artistic creation. Like their characters, these authors translate their own spiritual consciousness into works of art that have the potential to motivate positive change in the real lives of their readers. In my concluding chapter, "Healing the Wound: Women's Fiction and Feminist Theology" I identify themes common among the novelists I study and Christian and non-Christian feminist theologians. These themes include the development of feminine images of the divine, emphasis on immanence over transcendence, the apprehension of the divine in nature, and the necessity of challenging the reification of religious images and dualisms that undermine female subjectivity. I show the reciprocal relationship between fiction and theology, as theologians treat women's literature as sacred texts and fiction writers give life to abstract religious concepts through narrative.

CHAPTER II  
BORN INTO THE WORD:  
GIRL NARRATORS AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

For children born into religious families, religion is a pervasive part of the environment, permeating family relationships, friendships, community connections, and individual identity and morality. Religious belief and doctrine are not the result of choice but constitute an inherited system of knowledge and language that mediates experiences and relationships. Children in these environments understand the world and the way that they fit into it within the context of a specific worldview that is not immediately recognizable to them as one of many options; it is simply reality. As children come to their own religious consciousness, they learn that the world offers many options for expression and inquiry, and they must contend in some way with their religious heritage as it is situated in the rest of the world, whether that is to accept their parents' religion with renewed assurance of its truth, to reject it in favor of a different religion or none at all, or to place themselves somewhere in between those poles. Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*, Sheri Reynolds' *The Rapture of Canaan*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* depict young girls coming of age in religious environments and embarking on spiritual journeys that correspond with processes of physical and emotional maturation during adolescence. Rejecting the linear plotlines that characterize masculine heroic narratives, these novels are concerned with process, as the plots lead not to a destination and resolution but *through* cycles of questioning and



seeking that will go on, the authors seem to imply, beyond the ends of the novels. These authors dramatize girls' frustrations with the failures of religious discourse to provide useful models for expressing their feelings or for interpreting their experiences, motivating the girls to imagine new ways of understanding divinity and religion, and as a result, themselves and the world.

Comparing belief and behavior in social environments, or fields, to a game, Pierre Bourdieu describes players as engaged in a contract to observe "explicit and specific rules" for the sake of the game, "clearly seen for what it is, an arbitrary social construct." Social fields, on the other hand, are not entered into as a conscious act but are "the products of a long, slow process of autonomization," apparent to those who enter them as outsiders, but mostly invisible to those born into them:

The earlier a player enters the game and the less aware he is of the associated learning (the limiting case being, of course, that of someone born into, born with the game), the greater is his ignorance of all that is tacitly granted through his investment in the field and his interest in its very existence and perpetuation and in everything that is played for in it, and his unawareness of the unthought presuppositions that the game produces and endlessly reproduces, thereby reproducing the conditions of its own perpetuation. (66)

In the novels I discuss, girl protagonists, and many of the characters who surround them, begin at that level of belief, born into a social field that takes for granted a specific set of religious beliefs, often unaware of the extent to which these beliefs shape their concepts

of self, family, and community. Intensifying the elements of patriarchy and the dangers they present to girls and women, and often to boys and men, as well, Smith and Reynolds set their novels in extreme separatist Christian sects resembling exaggerated versions of Southern Holiness churches.<sup>10</sup> Smith's *Saving Grace* is narrated, we discover at the end of the novel, by a middle-aged Florida Grace Shepherd (Gracie) reflecting on her life. The novel follows Gracie from early childhood as the daughter of a snake-handling minister, Virgil Shepherd, through the death of her mother and abandonment by her father, marriage and divorce, and the birth of three children, one of whom is stillborn. Reynolds' *The Rapture of Canaan* is narrated by the young teenager Ninah Huff, who lives in an isolated religious community founded by her grandfather Herman. Ninah tells the story of falling in love with her step-nephew and childhood playmate James. Ninah must face terrible consequences when she becomes pregnant (consequences which James fears so much that he kills himself rather than face them). Her experience causes her to evaluate the ways of her family and community and to take actions that change her own life and the lives of everyone around her. While the Prices of Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* are members of the large Southern Baptist

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<sup>10</sup> Holiness and Pentecostal denominations both grew from Methodism and are characterized by a three-step salvation process: repentance, baptism, and speaking in tongues. Pentecostal beliefs in healing were made famous (and infamous) by the evangelists Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart. These denominations seek a state of holiness, or perfect love for God, that helps them to resist temptations, and some congregations emphasize a rejection of secular culture. While the larger Pentecostal and Holiness denominations denounce the practice of snake handling, some congregations, mostly located in the South and especially in Appalachia, continue to regularly handle snakes. They justify this practice by the last few verses of the book of Mark: "And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing they shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover" (Mark 16: 17-18). Paul K. Conkin's *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* describes the history and beliefs of these denominations in the context of American culture, and Mark Ellingsen's *Reclaiming Our Roots: An Inclusive Introduction to Church History* situates them within worldwide Christianity.

denomination, they, too, are isolated as the missionary father, Nathan, drags his wife and four daughters from their Georgia home to the Congo with the hope of converting the African people to Christianity. Kingsolver gives voice to the five female family members, as they each narrate portions of the novel and attest to Nathan's self-perceived role as "the captain of a sinking mess of female minds" (36). These exaggerated settings make stark the male-centered patterns of belief and behavior where the subtler patriarchy of more common religious denominations might be missed. Further, by creating social fields distinct from mainstream Christianity, the authors make a feminist critique of religion more accessible to readers, as it is not so tightly bound in traditions that readers are likely to hold themselves.

The concept of patriarchal religion is made literal on many levels in these novels. Not only do the church members worship God the father, but each church is also subject to a single authoritative male figure who is the founder and leader of the church and the sole interpreter of scripture. For the girl narrators, the paternal authority of the preachers is more than metaphorical or spiritual; Virgil is Gracie's father and Herman is Ninah's grandfather. The girls' concepts of God are bound to the images of their fathers—a conflation that Kingsolver emphasizes through her character Adah referring to Nathan as "Our Father," employing a commonly used name for God—and the authority of the fathers over their wives and children is always understood in religious terms, a constant earthly reminder of the inferior place of humanity before God (Kingsolver 32). For Smith's Gracie, "the God of the Old Testament who parted the Red Sea and sent boils to people and burned up Sodom and Gomorrah and smote his enemies dead" looks like her

father, “with his white hair and his sharp bright eyes and his deeply lined face” (24).

The preachers take upon themselves the privilege of naming awarded Adam in Genesis and take pride in naming their churches.<sup>11</sup> The name that Herman selects for the church in *The Rapture of Canaan*, The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind, articulates clearly the central principles of his religion. The first portion of the name, “Fire and Brimstone,” indicates an emphasis on the end times, both heaven and rapture.<sup>12</sup> According to Herman’s sermons, life should be led with a constant awareness that judgment is coming soon, and the ultimate goal of a Christian is to be in heaven with the Savior. The second part, “God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind” refers to the salvation by grace that each individual must accept as the only path to heaven. These beliefs, also central to evangelical Christianity, offer hope for transcending the pain and troubles of earthly life but also plant deeply in believers the fear of eternal torture in hell. Herman preaches that the rapture will come within five years, at which time those who are saved will be joyfully taken to paradise but those who are lost will be left behind to endure years of war, famine, and plagues. The obsession with the afterlife and imminent rapture eclipses earthly relationships and experiences, minimizing the potential for finding pleasure in this world and often proscribing the search for pleasure as at least a distraction from the transcendence of God and at most a

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<sup>11</sup> “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (Genesis 2:19).

“And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she was the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20).

<sup>12</sup> The term “rapture” refers to the belief that Jesus will return to Earth and bring all Christians to heaven. Various denominations interpret this event in vastly different ways, some literal and others metaphorical. In the context of Reynolds’ novel, the church believes that the saved will suddenly vanish from the Earth and the lost will remain to face a period of Tribulation during which Satan will reign. Signs of the rapture, for those left behind, include clothes of the raptured left empty where they stood and water turned to blood.

sin that endangers the immortal soul. Herman demands of his congregation as much separation from things of the world as they can possibly achieve. The children only go to school because it is required by law, and the men only hold jobs outside the church community when it is necessary for the community's subsistence. That the church members and outside community almost always refer to the church as "Fire and Brimstone" reflects the prominence of fear as the primary motivator within the church, overshadowing the potential for joy even in heaven.

In Smith's *Saving Grace*, Virgil also insists on a rejection of the secular world (despite his tendency to indulge his own sexual appetite). When the Shepherd family meets Carlton and Ruth Duty after crashing their car, Virgil tells them,

These children may not have new clothes on their back nor new shoes on their feet, but they are going to Heaven with me. These children are on the road to salvation. . . . As it says in the good Bible, this is not our home, we're only passing through. We're follering the plan of God, brother, and we have given our lives over to Him. He is leading us where he wants us to go. (9)

Likewise, Kingsolver's Price family must abandon many of their possessions when they move to Africa because their international flight has limitations on luggage. Nathan chastises his wife and daughters for clinging to frivolous material possessions like cake mix and hand mirrors, which they smuggle in under their clothes. Nathan, by contrast, "was bringing the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all" (19).

Through these father-preachers, Smith, Reynolds, and Kingsolver construct severe

religious frameworks within which their girl characters begin their spiritual journeys, but the central tenets of these fictional churches are drawn from interpretations of scripture that are common in contemporary Christian churches. God is transcendent, not of the earth, and to experience a connection with God, one must treat the elements of earthly existence as transitory and inferior to the life that awaits people after death or rapture. While the church community is important, the highest priority is the salvation of the individual, achieved through a personal experience of the grace of Jesus.

By telling their stories through young first person narrators enmeshed in settings of divinely-ordained male dominance, the authors of the three novels I discuss here dramatize the struggle of articulating female experiences within the limited lexicon of traditional Christianity. In each novel, set a few decades before it was actually written, the girl narrators are dominated by a patriarchal culture much more overt and pronounced than girls are likely to experience in contemporary America. They refrain, out of fear or lack of opportunity, from speaking publicly about their feelings and knowledge, but they are not entirely silenced; the first person narration represents a desire to speak, a refusal to be silenced, and an effort to reveal that they know and understand far more than the adults in their world—as well as the adult readers—want to recognize. Renee R. Curry argues that contemporary girl narrators

already know what life has brought and that the language prescribed as suitable for girls will not let them tell what they know. Girl “I” narrators of the contemporary fiction under discussion speak within an always already wisdom that profoundly disturbs adult readers because of reader

desire for genuine (or, at least, rhetorical) innocence and optimism on the part of girls—regardless of the girls' fictional or lived lives. (98)

Curry cites psychological studies of adolescent girls that describe a pattern of withdrawal and “shutting down” in which girls do not speak freely but edit their words to comply with the expectations of adults (97). The first person narrators of these books resist both the impulse to silence themselves and the definition of them as silenced victims as they reveal through their own words the truths that they know and discover. Through a voice of reflection, telling the reader in past tense what has already happened, the girls articulate a need to speak, to put their lives into words, to recover the experiences that they were not permitted to define aloud in communities that required their adherence to prescribed language. But even this act of recovery is constricted by the language made available to them as young children. In her essay “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan W. Scott argues that taking experience as authoritative evidence based on a subject’s “access to the real” fails to examine the ideological system that constructs subjects and “simultaneously establishes them and itself as given and outside of time, as the way things work, the way they inevitably are” (792, 779). The fictionalized religious systems set up by these authors, within which the narrative subjects work to define their experiences (even when they define their experiences in opposition to those ideologies), highlight the extent to which “subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event” (792). Part of the meaning-making process in which the characters are engaged involves an appropriation and revision of the language of their communities.

In the first few pages of *Saving Grace*, Smith emphasizes the importance of language in constructing meaning. The first-person narrator, Gracie, addresses the reader as a grown woman remembering her childhood as a backwoods preacher's daughter. "I mean to tell my story," Gracie says, "and I mean to tell the truth. I am a believer in the Word, and I am not going to flinch from telling it, not even the terrible things . . . for I've got to find out who I am and what has happened to me, so that I can understand what is happening to me now, and what is going to happen to me next" (4). Gracie stresses her need to apply language to experience and thoughts in order to process them and to give them meaning. Gracie must review and interpret the events in her life in order to break a destructive cycle and make a deliberate step in some direction. When she articulates this problem, she adapts the language of Christianity, which has been the most prominent source of meaning all her life. In Christianity, the Word is the Bible, the Word of God, and Jesus Christ fulfills the promise of the Old Testament prophets—he is the embodiment of the Word.<sup>13</sup> Her father's belief in the Word was manifest in the all-consuming obligations of a traveling preacher, forced to spread the Word to all people despite the sacrifice it demanded of himself and his family. When Gracie utters the phrase here, however, she does not mean the Word of God. She means her own words, about her own life. Just as her father put trust in the ultimate truth revealed in the Bible, Gracie applies words to her life in search of a truth that will be revealed in the telling. To tell her story, she must work within the semiotic system into which she was born, one

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<sup>13</sup> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [. . .] And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14).



in which God is masculine and women, by definition, are secondary to men, created as their helpers but also as the original sinners, constant threats to men's righteousness. In this system, Gracie is "contentious and ornery, full of fear and doubt in a family of believers" (3). To question the reality of Jesus is not an option that she can imagine because she cannot even put that thought into words. Initially, she cannot blame her father for the pain that her family has endured traveling with him, either. Instead, she is angry with Jesus for sending her family out to preach, "living with strangers and in tents and old school buses and what have you" (4).

In addition to appropriating biblical and church-endorsed language, putting the stories into the voices of young girls developing into adult women sets up a framework within which the authors can present an alternative narrative of spiritual development that contrasts with the conversion narrative central to Christian tradition. The traditional conversion narrative, which climaxes in one moment of revelation that immediately changes the life of the person who experiences it, has been told in many forms for hundreds of years not only in literature but also in churches in the form of sermons and testimonies. Just as the language of religion constructs identities and defines roles based on a worldview that is taken as ultimate reality, the narratives that this discourse posits define proper courses of human life and the consequences of straying from those courses. The conversion narrative is emphasized and repeated within these settings in order to demonstrate the redemptive power of Christ and to convince non-believers to surrender to their own conversions, through which their sins will be forgiven and their souls saved. In the context of Christianity, the only two options are to convert, to be

“saved” or “born again,” or to fail to convert, to remain “lost.” The dichotomy established by this narrative purports to encompass all human existence so that it is impossible to define oneself in any terms outside of these states of being. The authors I discuss here offer settings in which true conversion seems impossible. The narrators and many of the other characters in the novels, male and female, are born into religious communities and taught the laws and beliefs of their churches from birth. In this environment, to one day speak before your family and friends accepting the faith that had been part of everyday practice and language does not seem to be converting but rather following along the prescribed path and fulfilling well-known expectations. In fact, the only true conversion that might take place here would be rejection of the dominant religion.

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Reynolds portrays Ninah as distressed over the conversion experiences of young children, including her own, that are taken for granted in her community and almost seem to follow a script. Following his standard sermon warning of impending rapture and the agony to be felt by those left behind, Herman asks all those who fear Hell to raise their hands; he then takes them aside to “lead them to salvation”:

It happened the same way each time. The youngest children invited to the youth retreats would get saved right away. I’d raised my hand years earlier, but each time Grandpa Herman gave his after-the-rapture speech, I found it hard to catch my breath, hard to focus on God’s love and not

God's meanness and spite. I thought that really I wasn't saved at all. (65-66)

Ninah feels sick as she watches her cousin John led away to return "testifying," with "Grandpa Herman's words coming out of his eight-year-old mouth" (66). The importance of conversion, of being saved, is especially troubling to Ninah because she cannot maintain the sense of security that she is supposed to feel after "opening [her] heart." She believes in Jesus and in the rapture that Herman preaches, but while Smith's Gracie feels anger at Jesus for demanding so much of her, Ninah feels terror at the possibility that she is not really saved. Night after night she slips out of bed and turns on the faucets to see if the water has turned to blood, a sign that the rapture has come and she has been left behind.<sup>14</sup> Reynolds presents Ninah's torment as an example of the limitations of the conversion narrative. Because Ninah does not experience a moment of revelation and clarity precisely as described by members of her community, she must not be saved. No other explanation is possible within the discursive system that constructs her identity. At the same time, Ninah's doubts challenge the stability of the narrative itself. She tells the reader that she had "raised [her] hand years earlier," participating in the community's rituals and speaking the prescribed words that indicate her salvation. If Ninah's salvation is uncertain despite her public endorsement of the conversion narrative, then it is possible that others in the community who profess their own salvation experiences also fear that they are still lost. This disparity between private

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<sup>14</sup>“These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophesy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will” (Revelation 11:6).

feelings and public words indicates the possibility of a range of experiences that cannot be articulated within religious discourse.

As they portray the expectation of and failure to experience a single dramatic and satisfying spiritual event, Smith and Reynolds hold up the traditional conversion narrative as an artificial and even dangerous paradigm. These authors offer a different kind of narrative of spiritual development that emphasizes process, not a teleological journey toward a specific end but a continuous cycle of seeking; there may be important revealing moments along the way, but there is not a single moment of salvation nor is there a sense that the journey is over or will ever end. The authors align this spiritual process with the physical and emotional development of the adolescent girls. In their study of the adolescent in late-twentieth century American novels, Mary Jean DeMarr and Jane S. Bakerman observe that novelists frequently depict “altering family relationship as vital to [adolescent characters’] maturation” and that “most also stress the necessity for young people to put self-realization above acquiescence to relatives’ expectations. Almost all recognize that gratifying maturity and independence are very often earned by the pain of separation or realignment” (27). Part of this process of realignment includes a reconsideration of their family’s religious beliefs and practices. “Before [a girl] can become a fully participating member of the adult world, she must determine her value system,” and “either a reaffirmation of basic principles or belief or a break with the original faith may be used to indicate the maturation of the young woman” (103). The same may be said of adult women in any religious tradition who feel as if their religion does not speak to their experience or that they must seek

independent religious knowledge not confined to the words delivered by the official, ordained speakers of the faith. Just as a girl's identity and security are wrapped up in family relationships, even if those relationships are dysfunctional or abusive, a woman at any age may feel that her identity and security within her family, her community, and even the universe are wrapped up in her religious traditions. To search for elements of self-definition outside of the family or outside of a particular religion can be frightening, as one risks being rejected and unloved by those who feel betrayed by one's questions and decisions. But "separation or realignment" may be necessary for the girl or woman to mature emotionally or spiritually. In these novels, the need to separate is far more than a necessity in the maturation process; the dangerous and abusive communities in which these novels are set intensify the need for the girls to break away and to find a different way to be in the world.

Processes of maturation are certainly experienced by boys and men, as well, but by anchoring the novels on the timeline of female sexual development, the authors present spiritual crises that are uniquely female. An examination of a subtle yet significant common element in Smith's and Reynolds' novels—a girl's first menstruation—reveals a gradual but momentous development of spiritual and religious consciousness that is grounded in the female body, a site that feminist theologians have sought to reclaim from a masculine tradition that demonizes it.<sup>15</sup> Expounding upon her

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<sup>15</sup> While most contemporary Christians do not emphasize the taboos associated with menstruation mentioned in the book of Leviticus, some denominations, represented here in the fictional churches created by the authors, continue to characterize the female body as a dangerous site of temptation, citing the story of Eve as evidence that women seek to corrupt men. For a discussion of the biblical references to menstruation, see Charlotte Fonrobert's *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*.

claim that religious questioning and searching arises out of personal and community crisis, Penelope Washbourn writes,

a woman's search for psychological and spiritual wholeness goes through the particular life crises of being a female body. These stages are not just psychological phases to be negotiated but turning points that raise fundamentally religious questions. At each juncture, a woman must redefine her self-identity in relation to her perception of the purpose of life and in relation to her understanding of her own identity in relation to that ultimate value. (247)

Addressing the specific experience of first menstruation, Washbourn argues that "menstruation is experienced as anxiety by the young girl, not only because of cultural attitudes toward the female body . . . but because menstruation is essentially a dramatic physical and emotional event" (250). The moment of menstruation is one of the most obvious tangible markers of a girl's transition into womanhood, a point at which the girl must redefine her understanding of who she is and how she fits in the world. Culturally constructed gender roles inform a girl's process of self-definition by providing a narrative of normal sexual development as well as a particular definition of woman that stands as the girl's (apparently) inevitable destination. Not only does religious discourse construct definitions of gender (the hierarchical nature of which are emphasized to greater or lesser degrees in various denominations) but that discourse also lends a divine, and therefore, apparently unquestionable, authority to those definitions.

Because her experience of sexual development does not proceed along an expected trajectory, Smith's Gracie fails to develop the interpretive framework necessary to construct a positive identity as a mature female. By the time Gracie experiences her first menstruation, she has been involved in a sexual relationship with her half-brother, her mother has killed herself, and her father has taken her from the home that she loves and made her his assistant in his traveling ministry. Gracie is emotionally broken and filled with guilt and self-loathing. On a night when her father has been especially successful in his evangelism, baptizing many members of the congregation who are awed by Virgil's charismatic preaching and snake handling, Gracie goes home with strangers, as she has done many times before, where she discovers the stain on her underwear.

I knew I had started my period at last. I was a real woman now. I did not feel any different, however, and it did not seem very important in light of everything else that had happened. I rooted around in the bathroom drawer and found some Kotex.

I had to smile, thinking that God had provided both me and Daddy with what we needed that day. (129)

Smith uses this moment in Gracie's life to portray a stunted spiritual development. As a child, Gracie is able to seek and question, but the circumstances of her life have forced her to fill the role of an adult woman far before she is mature enough to cope with adulthood. Gracie recognizes that the onset of menstruation should be an event that marks an important transition, but her framework is so badly skewed that she cannot find

meaning in it. Sexual maturation is irrelevant, as she has already had a sexual relationship and believes that her mother's death is punishment for that. She has also already been performing her father's notion of the role of a preacher's wife, as she has replaced her mother by his side, reading the Bible aloud during his sermons and preparing meals for him when food is available. Gracie's childhood anger at God had been the motivation for her individual spiritual journey, pushing her to question her place in God's plan and to seek spiritual fulfillment outside of her father's limited religious framework, through nature and through the love of her mother. At this point in her life, the anger has faded, replaced with resignation. God's plan is a fact, and not one that requires analysis. God has provided Virgil with the snakes he needs to dazzle a new congregation and provided Gracie with the simple device she needs to handle the problem of her menstrual cycle, which is simply a sanitary issue, devoid of significance or potential.

The first menstrual cycle is a moment when a girl usually approaches an older woman, typically her mother, for help. In addition to offering advice and information on practical matters, a woman has the opportunity at this time in a girl's life to affirm the symbolic importance of the moment and to assist her in her process of self-definition. Gracie lacks a female mentor because when she left with her father she also left Ruth Duty, the woman who would have cared for her in her mother's absence. At this milestone, Gracie finds herself among strangers, nameless to her. Smith briefly creates a scene in which Gracie might reclaim some of the sacredness of the event, when Gracie approaches the woman who lives in the house to ask if she can have more Kotex:



This was a real poor blonde woman who sat in a kitchen chair nursing a baby while another child, a little girl, slept on the floor at her feet, pretty as an angel. She looked up from her baby to me, and her blue eyes slowly filled with tears. “Why, sure you can, honey,” she said. “You can take the whole damn box,” which I did. (130)

In this scene, Smith offers an image of procreativity and nurturing as the mother sits before Gracie with her children touching her life-giving body, which has birthed them and fed them. Gracie’s physical change indicates that she has also reached the stage in her life when she has the potential to reproduce and to mother. Washbourn asserts that “menstruation can symbolize the power of our bodies to give us joy, deepen and enrich our experience of life, and increase the totality of our self-expression.” This power does not necessitate and is not confined to reproduction, but the “potential procreativity of our bodies” symbolizes “the linking of ourselves to the creative power of nature and to the creative aspect of all human relationships” (256). Here, however, Gracie cannot interpret the beauty in the scene before her or in her own sexual development.

Overwhelmed and trapped by the responsibility that comes with her own procreativity (and possibly pregnant again, Smith hints), the blond woman cannot offer a more hopeful interpretation of Gracie’s milestone. The conversation between Gracie and the woman ends there; Gracie has already determined that her life as a woman will be dismal and that she deserves every misery that comes her way. The marker of physical development fails to incite a renewed effort toward a more positive identity formation.

In this brief scene, Smith underscores Gracie's need to separate from her father and his lifestyle in order to resume her spiritual development.

Like Gracie, Ninah of *The Rapture of Canaan* has constructed a negative image of womanhood prior to her own sexual maturation. In her reflective narrative voice, Ninah articulates a clear difference between how she saw her community as a child and how she sees it as a young adult: "When I was a child, I saw our community as a special place where God's children could be safe from the influence of the wicked world. Later, when I was older, I saw our community differently. I saw us like an island. Like an island sinking from the weight of fearful hearts" (17). In this statement, Reynolds summarizes a coming to consciousness that corresponds to coming of age. Early in the novel, Ninah, who finds great joy in being with the other children in her community, observes a troubling difference in the way that adults conduct themselves. As children, she and her first love, James, are not expected to fulfill the roles prescribed to adult men and women and feel freer to express themselves and to find joy in the world. The adults, however, must resist earthly pleasures and keep their sights on heaven. James and Ninah both recognize a disconnect between their own feelings and beliefs and those that are required of adults; for example, they confide in each other that they do not believe that their Hindu friends from school are going to hell as the adults have told them.

Attempting to draw clear lines, James refers to the adult church members as "*them*" (emphasis in original text), distinguishing the "Believers" from himself, but he retracts his statement, unable to say that he is not a Believer (93). Both Ninah and James struggle to find words to describe their fears and doubts. They both face growing up to

be something that they do not want to be, but as a girl, Ninah is growing into something very different from James. Ninah has been told throughout her life that women carry “the curse of Eve” and that “the devil comes to man in the shape of a woman” (97, 159). As she grows into a woman, she grows into the role of original sinner. She also becomes a church woman working to pass these lessons and traditions to the children of the next generation.

Taught at an early age to be ashamed of her female body, Ninah hides her first menstruation from her mother and grandmother. She describes the day as the beginning of “a change for the worse” and hides her stained underwear in a box until she has none left and steals some from her cousin (35). She finds no joy in growing into an adult because she believes that she will lose her individuality and become a participant in following and enforcing laws like every adult she knows. She even prays “that God would stunt [her] growth and keep [her] little” so that at least her stature would distinguish her among so many people who look and dress alike (38).<sup>16</sup> Ninah is embarrassed to hear her older sister speaking in tongues during an emotional church service and hopes that it will never happen to her. At the same time she is afraid that her wish will come true, that she will never receive God’s language, “his almighty baptizing wind,” and as a result be left behind when her loved ones are raptured. Ninah is likewise troubled at evidence of James’s transition into adulthood. The pleasure she feels in being with James is tarnished by his increasing acceptance as a man in the church.

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<sup>16</sup> The sameness of all of the members of the Fire and Brimstone community goes beyond dress to include physical features. The characters rarely marry outside of the community, which continues through intermarriage among just a few families. While there is no explicit example of inbreeding, most of the characters are familial relations, even Ninah and her lover, James, who is also her step-nephew.

While Ninah still wants to play and draw pictures during the Sunday sermon, James sits up straight, prays aloud in church, and sits and talks with the men after the service, ignoring Ninah and the other children.

The most vivid scene of Ninah's (and James's) maturation comes after James has killed his first deer. Ninah's account of the story begins with her frustration with the gender segregation of deer hunting days. She sees the men and boys leave excitedly every Saturday morning while the girls and women stay home and clean; Ninah wishes every week that she could go with the boys. On this day, the men return home celebrating James's first deer, which Ninah is glad to hear until she sees that he has killed a doe. Preserving the doe so that they can produce more young for the next season, the men typically only shoot bucks, but since it is his first deer, James has been allowed to kill a doe. While this tradition acknowledges the importance of the female's reproductive potential, it also underscores the deliberate effort of the men to control that potential. The practice of sparing the doe to meet the reproductive needs of the deer population is entirely pragmatic and indicates no special reverence for the female of the species, a fact emphasized by the arbitrary dismissal of the rule in the case of a first kill.<sup>17</sup> Here Reynolds creates a male rite-of-passage ritual that alludes to baptism; the blood of a boy's first deer is poured over his head, recalling scriptural references to

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<sup>17</sup> In reality, deer management, the practice of strategically hunting or sparing female deer, is stringently monitored by state game commissions, either forbidding hunters to kill doe or requiring them to kill a prescribed number of doe before they are allowed to kill a buck, depending on the condition of the deer population. While Reynolds does not use the term "management" in her novel, noting that term here further emphasizes the goal of this practice to impose order on the female body and its reproductive capacity.

being washed in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.<sup>18</sup> Mysteriously troubled by a ritual she has witnessed many times before, Ninah is asked to participate by bringing the bucket they will use to catch the deer's blood. Standing too close when the deer is cut, Ninah is covered with the spray of the animal's blood. A moment of triumph for James, met with applause from everyone in attendance, becomes a moment of humiliation for Ninah. Everyone, including her mother and grandmother, laughs at her playfully and teases her about not having "sense enough not to stand so close," but Ninah cannot take the event in good spirits. She stands before them with her arms held out away from her body "as if [she] didn't want [her] hands to touch [her]self" (51). In this moment, Ninah is painfully aware of her female body and sees it as the object of ridicule even among the other women. She has worked so hard to hide her sexual maturity from everyone, but standing before the whole community at an event designed to mark a boy's passage into manhood, she is covered from head to toe in female blood. Reynolds cements the connection between the deer bleeding ritual and Ninah's first menstruation by having Ninah sneak her stained underwear in with the bloody dress when her grandmother, Nanna, does the laundry. Nanna seems to understand and respect Ninah's desire for privacy and secrecy and returns the clean underwear to Ninah hidden within the folds of her dress. Looking at the blood stains, "dingy like the bottom of a sock," Ninah is still sad and ashamed of this sign of her maturing body, remembering with jealousy the

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<sup>18</sup> These references appear several times in the New Testament, most notably in 1 Peter and Revelation. These words also appear in a popular hymn by Elisha A. Hoffman which asks, "Are you washed in the blood, in the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?"

underwear that she stole from her cousin Pammy, “the lining so white it made [her] cry” (52, 35).

Like Smith, Reynolds uses the event of first menstruation to illustrate how male-dominated social structures, like religion, can fail girls because they do not provide a means by which girls can understand their specifically female experiences. The girls feel alienated from their own bodies because they do not have adequate language or rituals to express a positive, celebratory relationship with the adult female body. Because the women characters are also firmly grounded in those religious structures, they also fail to help the girls to develop a positive sense of self-worth. Not only do their religious language and practices degrade women, but they also interfere with the relationship between generations of women by creating a system in which adult women pass internalized beliefs about the inferiority of femaleness on to girls.<sup>19</sup> Reynolds and Smith create protagonists who, because they are born into particular belief systems, cannot easily recognize the constructions that govern their lives. As the characters mature and expand their sources of knowledge beyond their families’ religious traditions, which include relationships with people outside of their community and books that introduce them to different ways of being, they slowly begin to identify other options for understanding the world and themselves. Imagining fringe sects with unusual and shocking practices—for Smith, it is snake-handling and for Reynolds, self-harm—these authors make the arbitrary nature of social constructions obvious to readers because these practices distance the world of the novel from the culture in which readers

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<sup>19</sup> In Chapter III, I discuss ways in which authors seek to repair this generational rift by restoring the mother-daughter relationship.

live. While Kingsolver's characters more closely resemble a conventional American family practicing a form of Christianity with which many more readers might identify, she creates critical distance by removing her characters entirely from American culture and placing them in the Congo. Smith and Reynolds use the process of maturing to highlight the need for girls to develop religious consciousness independent of family and community, but in *The Poisonwood Bible* the girl characters are forced by culture shock into re-evaluating their beliefs.

The Price girls' transformations begin even as they prepare to leave for their mission in Africa, because the necessity of choosing which material things to leave behind forces them to question their needs and prioritize their desires. Taking their lifestyle and culture for granted is no longer an option, as they analyze each object they consider packing with the hope of approximating as closely as possible their lives in Georgia. The girls' efforts to define themselves and their lives by holding onto their things are thwarted by their father. Not only has he forced them into the predicament in the first place by volunteering to go to Africa, but he also stands over them, admonishing them to "consider the lilies of the field, which have no need of a hand mirror or aspirin tablets" (Kingsolver 14). Nathan establishes his paternal authority through constant use of biblical language and even punishes his daughters by forcing them to copy verses chosen to fit their specific offenses. Kingsolver portrays Nathan as a man entirely defined by the Word, but she undermines this character's claims of authority by placing him always as the object of the girls' observations, never as the narrative subject of the novel. Adah's assertion that "Our Father speaks for all of us, as far as I can see" calls

attention to the novel's narrative structure, wherein all of the daughters speak *for themselves* and their father's voice is filtered through their perceptions (32). Through the device of multiple first-person narrators, Kingsolver rejects the notion that a singular voice can adequately define the values and beliefs of a culture or even a family. She decenters the perspective of the father, and with him the Bible, and introduces multiple (but all female) voices always in the process of defining and redefining themselves and their understandings of the world.<sup>20</sup> In addition to offering several perspectives on the same story, Kingsolver uses the narrative voices of the girl characters to show the necessity of drawing on multiple interpretive frameworks to construct a fuller worldview. Nathan is unswerving in his conviction that the Bible (more specifically, his literal interpretation of the Bible) offers every answer one could need, and his ultimate failure is a direct result of his refusal to open his mind to other kinds of knowledge, especially the knowledge of the African people he hopes to convert. Adah, with her poetically transgressive play on Nathan's claims to biblical authority, sums up his problem:

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<sup>20</sup> While my primary focus is on Kingsolver's depiction of the girls' development of religious consciousness, Kingsolver's narrative technique also works to specifically address the political structures of colonialism. Anne Marie Austenfeld argues that telling the story of Congolese independence from the perspective of a handful of women struggling just to live from one day to the next serves to express "one of the driving truths of the novel: that ordinary people often fail to see a connection between themselves and the larger political movements and systems at work in the world in which they live" (299). Further, Austenfeld argues that Kingsolver's use of female narrators "arises from a lack of confidence in the adequacy of *male* voices that have told us about the Congo so far, especially Conrad's Marlow" (301). Kimberly D. Koza argues that "Kingsolver's exploration of the interrelationship between the personal and the political is shaped in part by the feminist insight that relationships within the family mirror, and are in large part constructed by, power relationships in larger society" and that "the family structure replicates the power structure of colonialism" (285). Kingsolver's representation of religion is relevant to this argument, as Nathan claims dominance over his family in the name of God and, as a missionary, acts deliberately to suppress the native Congolese culture and replace it with Western culture and religion.



In the beginning was the word the herd the blurred the turd the debts incurred the theatrical absurd. Our Father has a bone to pick with this world, and oh, he picks it like a sore. Picks it with the Word. His punishment is the Word and his deficiencies are failures of words—as when he grows impatient with translation and strikes out precariously on his own, telling parables in his own half-baked Kikongo. (213)

Nathan's lack of respect for the language and culture of the Africans he tries to convert leads him to neglect important inflections of tone and emphasis, so he unknowingly preaches that Jesus is a poisonwood tree (a plant that inflames the skin with itchy sores) and that he wants to terrorize rather than baptize the African children. Dismissing their important objections to his baptizing their children, Nathan eventually gathers a boat full of children without their parents' permission and takes them into the river, where they are eaten by crocodiles. Nathan's refusal to allow other ways of speaking and knowing to inform his words and actions not only limits his understanding of the world but has mortal consequences for himself, the African village, and his youngest daughter Ruth May, who is murdered out of hatred for Nathan.

Unlike Nathan, the girls allow their experiences in Africa to expand their worldviews. Kingsolver creates each girl with a different approach to understanding the foreign culture in which they find themselves, and as time passes and the girls get older, they stand as varied examples of developing awareness.<sup>21</sup> Ruth May breaches the

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<sup>21</sup> Orleanna, the girls' mother, also narrates portions of the book, and Kingsolver creates an interesting contrast to the girls' narration. Each girl, except for Ruth May who is still a child when she dies, ages over the course of the book, and her narrative voice seems to mature with her, representing the developing consciousness I describe. Orleanna, on the other hand, always speaks from her retirement home in

language barrier between herself and the African children by using hand signals and games to communicate and play with them. Even Rachel, who resists the influence of Africa by dreaming of what her life will be on her return to Georgia, acknowledges important ruptures in her insular conception of reality, as when she realizes that Marilyn Monroe's diamonds were likely dug up by Congolese diamond miners. Of the four sisters, Kingsolver most fully develops the twins, Leah, who goes from wholly submitting to her father's will and instruction to wholly rejecting it, and Adah, who takes advantage of her physical difference to quietly assert her independence before they ever go to Africa.

Early in the novel Leah stands in awe of her father. She internalizes his vocalized assessments of the inferior female minds of his wife and daughters, one of his many difficult responsibilities as a missionary of God. She stays close to him, hangs on his words, and studies her Bible so that she will have the right words when he tests her. Describing her perception of her father and her desire to please him, Leah tells the reader:

Some people find him overly stern and frightening, but that is only because he was gifted with such keen judgment and purity of heart. He has been singled out for a life of trial, as Jesus was. Being always the first to spot flaws and transgressions, it falls upon Father to deliver penance.

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Georgia, many years after their return to the United States. She speaks with a reflective voice overtly interpreting the meaning of her experience in the context of the Belgian Congo and Congolese independence. She always knows that she left her husband and that her youngest daughter died, hinting at these events before they are fully revealed to the reader. The contrast between the mother, who is an adult when the novel begins, and the girls, who are becoming adults, highlights the use of adolescence as a means of representing spiritual and intellectual development.

Yes he is always ready to acknowledge the potential salvation in a sinner's heart. I know that someday, when I've grown large enough in the Holy Spirit, I will have his whole-hearted approval. (41)

Kingsolver creates Leah as a representative of the purest kind of believer, one who is born into the faith and does not question its inherent assumptions. As long as she can believe that her father is right, Leah has no reason to stray from his religion or his laws, but once they are in Africa, her father's pronouncements about God's will prove incongruent with reality. Leah feels a sense of terror looking into her father's face after his vegetable garden—intended to demonstrate to the village that “it's God's own will to cultivate the soil”—fails to produce anything edible; in this moment she senses “that the sun was going down on many things [she] believed in” (Kingsolver 41, 80). With this statement, Kingsolver marks the beginning of Leah's separation from her father's religion to form her own understanding of the world. With the primary ordering principle of her life now put into question, Leah is motivated to analyze other structures. The novel's African setting and American narrators allow Kingsolver to juxtapose cultural practices and expectations to reveal the constructedness not only of religion but also of family, community, race, gender, and even childhood. When Leah tries to make friends, she observes that while the African boys are free to play, the girls are “too busy hauling around firewood, water, or babies” (114). Faced with gender roles of another culture, Leah recognizes them as arbitrary constructions; moreover, she is able to turn that lens on her own culture. Noting that children begin to work for their own survival and that of their families as soon as they can walk, Leah sees “that the whole idea and

business of Childhood was nothing guaranteed,” that it is “something more or less invented by white people and stuck onto the front end of grown-up life like a frill on a dress” (115). Gradually Leah distances herself from her father and Christianity and begins to participate more fully in the village culture. In doing so she is not constrained by the limited gender roles defined by her father or those held up by the African community. Even though it angers her father and the African men alike, Leah teaches boys in the village school and learns to hunt, two activities traditionally reserved for men. Because she can see the social constructions for what they are, she feels free to observe or ignore them as she pleases, understanding all along that the consequence might well be ostracism or retribution. As Patricia Goldblatt argues, Leah is “severed from family, gender, and country” and in that state can “evolve and shed her old self” (46). By holding up Leah’s growing independence as evidence of positive change, Kingsolver emphasizes the necessity of understanding and acknowledging social and political constructions in order to transcend them.

The religion of her Father, however, is still deeply ingrained in her. Even after Leah tells the reader that God has abandoned her, and even after she openly defies her father, Leah prays to Jesus to help her shoot straight when she raises her bow to kill her first animal. Because she has always turned to prayer as a way of coping with fear and uncertainty, it is natural for her, in this moment, to again turn to prayer. But here she amends her prayer to Jesus with more prayers “to any other god who would listen” (348). Her confidence in the God of her father shaken, she cannot entirely reject the concept of *a god*, something more powerful than she at work in the universe. Instead,

she opens herself up to the polytheistic spiritual traditions practiced in the village, albeit vaguely and with no particular god in mind. With this move Kingsolver shows how Leah's understanding of religion as construction leads her to use religion as a tool, a coping mechanism, rather than to believe in it as an ultimate and universal truth. Leah's actions after Ruth May's death further exemplify this crucial shift. As their mother moves about silently clearing their house of all its contents, actions that the girls cannot comprehend and are afraid to interrupt, Leah and her sisters kneel and pray "the dumb prayers of our childhood":

"Our Father which art in heaven," and "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." I could not remotely believe that any Shepherd was leading me through this dreadful valley, but the familiar words stuffed my mouth like cotton, and it was some relief to know, as least, that one sentence would follow upon another. It was my only way of knowing that to do. (372)

Confronted with the dead body of their little sister and the surprising reaction of their mother, the Price girls are unsure of what will happen next. A world without Ruth May is inconceivable to them, and led by Leah, they turn to the shared words that they do know. The predictable sequences of words lend a sense of order to their immediate experience of this traumatic event, which changes their world forever. Narrating this scene through Leah's perspective, Kingsolver offers an interpretation of their actions filtered through Leah's new consciousness: Leah prays because it is the only way she has ever seen people cope with death. It is important to note that Leah's prayers are not

spontaneous, which would indicate a belief (even if it were temporary) that her pleas in that moment would be heard by God and a hope that God was active enough in the world to intercede by offering her comfort from her grief. Rather, Leah's prayers are a mechanical behavior, the result of her inability to process the reality that she faces. Leah's self-conscious recognition of the emptiness of the words she speaks further emphasizes that she has come to understand religion as an instrument of humanity, a means of coping with an overwhelming reality. As such, it is available to her when she needs it, but she is not a servant of it.

Just as Kingsolver presents Leah's recognition of social constructions as the catalyst to her development of an expanded worldview, she presents Adah as already free of many of the constraints of those constructions and, therefore, able to continuously question, challenge, and reconstruct the framework upheld by her father. Adah is certainly not immune to cultural assumptions, especially the effects of other people's perceptions of her. She is, however, in a position that enables her to view critically from an early age the constructions around her, as she understands herself to exist outside of most of them. Born with hemiplegia, or paralysis on one side of her body, and Broca's aphasia, a condition that interferes with the ability to speak, Adah imagines herself sharing her mother's womb with her twin:

Oh, I can easily imagine the fetal mishap: we were inside the womb together dum-de-dum when Leah suddenly turned and declared, Adah you are just too slow. I am taking all the nourishment here and going on ahead. She grew strong as I grew weak. (Yes! Jesus loves me!) And so

it came to pass, in the Eden of our mother's womb, I was cannibalized by my sister. (34)

Adah dashes the image of the womb as a safe and nurturing space by redefining it as the site of danger and competition. The injustice of one twin thriving while the other deteriorates prevents her from accepting the idea that she is created by a loving God. The circumstances surrounding her birth give her a unique perspective on her father's religion and their particular task in the Congo. She tells the reader that she stopped believing in God at age five because, having "spent more time than the average child pondering unfortunate accidents of birth," she cannot accept that salvation is based entirely on being "born within earshot of a preacher" (171). Kingsolver indicates that Adah's hyperawareness of her body limits the degree to which the religious practices in which her father compels her to participate can become internalized triggers to prescribed thoughts and emotions associated with religious belief. In his description of the relationship between belief and the body, Bordieu states:

Every social order systematically takes advantage of the disposition of the body and language to function as depositories of deferred thoughts that can be triggered off at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture which *recalls* the associated thoughts and feelings, in one of the inductive states of the body which, as actors know, give rise to states of mind. (69)

Adah's exceptional experience of body and language make the system of the social order clear to her at an early age. While she kneels, bows her head, folds her hands, and

mouths the prayers of her church, those activities are to her as arbitrary as playing a game, at times they are even a source of amusement to her. With her parents' dysfunctional relationship as her primary example of marriage, Adah is grateful that her disability puts her outside typical gender expectations, "exempt from marriage" and the fate of becoming a wife (72).<sup>22</sup> Even intelligence is revealed to be a social construct; Adah attributes her elementary school designation as gifted to her association with Leah, when the principal just as easily could have sent Adah to "Special Ed" based on her difference from Leah (56). Aware of others' expectations associated with her disability, she remains silent largely by choice, cherishing the privacy that her silence affords her as well as the vantage point she gains by virtue of constantly being underestimated. She claims legitimacy for her way of seeing the world differently from others around her, "through Adah eyes" (30).

Beyond the comprehension of any of her family members, Adah has an incredible mastery of language, and this characteristic, more than any other, allows her to challenge her father's authority and his religion. Adah does not speak out openly against her father, nor does she refuse to go to church or study the Bible. Instead, she silently protests by refusing to allow her thoughts and beliefs to be controlled by her father's teaching, taking special pleasure in her secret transgressions. Through Adah's manipulation of language, Kingsolver simultaneously draws attention to religion as a

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<sup>22</sup> In his analysis of disability in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Stephen D. Fox notes that (in the world of the novel if not in actual African culture) the African community does not "close the option of family to her" and "liberates Adah and most of the Price women" (408). While Adah does seem comforted by the "benign approval" she receives in the Congo, Kingsolver emphasizes that Adah does not interpret the possibility of marriage as liberation. Observing that "many women in Kilanga were more seriously disfigured and had husbands notwithstanding," Adah adds her own wordplay critique of the institution: "*Standing with naught. Husbands.*" (Kingsolver 72).



linguistic construct and presents language as a means of deconstructing the limited perception of reality promoted by religion. While Nathan is in many ways imprisoned by the Word, compelled to spread the Word of God no matter the cost to himself or his family, Adah masters not only the words of the Bible but also various works of literature that she reads without her father's knowledge. She amuses herself by writing down (from memory) a passage from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and passing it to Leah, who replies that it is from the book of Luke. Placing the Bible in a category with works of fiction and poetry, Adah appreciates it as a form of human expression but takes joy in undermining its position as a full account of ultimate reality (at the same time mocking her sister's position as her father's "star pupil"). *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is equally valid as a source of language to articulate her experiences and to interpret her place in the world, as she expresses her "strong sympathy for Dr. Jekyll's dark desires and for Mr. Hyde's crooked body" (55). In addition to reading as much as possible, Adah constantly expands her linguistic reservoir by learning French and Kikongo, the native language of the Congo, but she is not constrained by the conventional syntax of any language. By selecting Broca's aphasia as the medical explanation of Adah's difficulty in speaking, Kingsolver presents agrammatism—a pathological inability to speak in a grammatical sequence—as a way of transcending the limitations of language, an exceptional ability rather than a disability ("I am told a normal brain will not grasp it," she tells us) (57). Adah's speech difficulties do not prevent her from thinking or writing (and hence, narrating her portions of the novel) in perfect grammar comfortable to readers, but when she chooses, Adah can broach the

rules of language to read and think in a different way. She reads each book frontwards and then backwards, to “learn new things from it,” and creates meaningful palindromes to critique everyone and everything around her. Her father’s emotional sermon becomes the “Amen enema” and the words of “Amazing Grace” are replaced with her own palindromic “*snmyhymns*”: “*Evil, all its sin is still alive!*” (72). While in many ways Adah is in the same predicament as the rest of her family, Kingsolver demonstrates through this character the liberatory potential of language, a stark contrast to the oppressive uses of language represented by Nathan. Solidifying these connections, Kingsolver artfully employs the Kikongo language, which depends on pitch and rhythm to communicate meaning and is, therefore, easily mispronounced and mistranslated, a condition that troubles outsiders, like Nathan, who, out of ignorance or arrogance, neglect to respect its subtleties. As Adah’s recognition of language as a fluid construct helps her to survive in Africa and in the home of Nathan Price, Nathan’s limiting adherence to the English Bible destroys him.<sup>23</sup>

Along with Smith and Reynolds, Kingsolver highlights a central concern of feminists thinking about religion; as Mary Daly put it, “if God is male, then male is God” (*Beyond God the Father* 19). Even if a particular religious denomination does not emphasize gender hierarchy, speaking of God as male fosters gender inequality. These novels portray social structures that overtly replicate biblical gender hierarchy and invoke the maleness of God as endorsement of male dominance over women. Those

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<sup>23</sup> Kingsolver states in her Author’s Note to *The Poisonwood Bible* that she “couldn’t have written the book at all without two remarkable sources of literary inspiration, approximately equal in size: K. E. Laman’s *Dictionnaire Kikongo-Français*, and the King James Bible.”

structures, in turn, perpetuate the image of a male God. The authors I study here suggest that recognizing the constructions for what they are, at least in part, is a necessary step in the process of reaching a new and more authentic consciousness. For the girl characters in these novels, the unseating of the men who stand in their childhood as the representatives of God on earth—not Jesus, but their fathers—is an essential first step. This step takes various forms, including physical separation, public rejection, or private resentment, and sometimes all three. But the rejection of the father as God does not always lead to a total rejection of religion, as each of these authors define their characters' new consciousness as still in some way religious. Smith's Gracie, as I will discuss in the next chapter, returns to church in the end with a new understanding of how to relate to God, based on her mother's relationship to Jesus and not her father's. Reynolds' Ninah chooses to stay in her community to change it for the better, even as she commits dramatic acts of defiance. Every one of Kingsolver's five narrators abandons Christianity and all organized religion, but each finds a new kind of religion, defined by herself and her individual understanding of the world. Through Adah's narration, Kingsolver imagines ways of approaching the mystery of creation and one's place in the universe—questions which are central to religious thought and which Kingsolver labels, through Adah, as religious. Both Adah's mother Orleanna and her sister Leah devote themselves, to varying degrees, to nature and humanitarian work, holding as the highest goals environmental responsibility and human justice. Orleanna surrounds her home with flowers and marches for civil rights while Leah is constantly engaged in humanitarian efforts in Africa, including agricultural education. Adah finds

her religion in the study of viruses, through which she develops an understanding of God as a Creator concerned with all creation, not just humanity. Rather than focusing entirely on her relationship to a singular God, each of these characters develops an awareness of her relationship to all of humanity and nature, redefining the concept of religion set out in the sermons and books of the father-preacher.<sup>24</sup> Adah's description of her activity as a "religion," through which she approaches "God," reveals, as well, the impossibility of breaking entirely from the language system through which the earliest concepts of self and others are defined. Kingsolver emphasizes Adah's recognition of religious language as means of articulating an understanding of the world when she has Adah set out her own creation myth, introduced as "the story I believe in" (528). Kingsolver couples this concept of a malleable religious myth, altered to suit the changing understanding of its author, with another reminder of the inadequacy of static stories and laws: Adah's collection of misprinted Bibles. A denunciation of biblical literalism, these Bibles represent the necessity of contextualizing sacred texts within the history of the people who produced them. "Believe this," Adah explains, "mistakes are part of the story" (533). Kingsolver's novel acknowledges the mistakes made in the name of religion, but through stories of development and coming-to-consciousness, she illustrates useful ways of employing religious language and structures to imagine ways of being and knowing that transcend the limitations of religious discourse.

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<sup>24</sup> Although she is not Nathan's daughter, I include Orleana here because, as Nathan's wife, she is also subject to his rule, and her "new religion" of nature worship and social justice is relevant to this discussion.

CHAPTER III  
RETURN TO THE WOMB:  
RESTORING THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

By privileging masculine language and male images and perpetuating gender hierarchies, “the religions of patriarchy have stolen daughters from their mothers and mothers from their daughters,” Mary Daly writes in her foundational work of feminist theology *Beyond God the Father* (149). Theologian Carol P. Christ addresses this loss as well, describing how “Christianity celebrates the father’s relation to the son and the mother’s relation to the son, but the story of mother and daughter is missing . . . the mother-daughter relation is distorted in patriarchy because the mother must give her daughter over to men in a male-defined culture in which women are viewed as inferior. The mother must socialize her daughter to become subordinate to men, and if her daughter challenges patriarchal norms, the mother is likely to defend the patriarchal structures against her own daughter” (285). In her interviews of mothers raising daughters in traditionally patriarchal religions, Tova Hartman Halbertal finds that Christian, Islamic, and Jewish mothers who themselves feel ambivalent about their religious cultures often deliberately hide their negative feelings and their questions from their children. These mothers understand religion as integral to their family and community life as well as to their personal identities and know that if their daughters question their religion they risk rejection by the community. Halbertal also notes that the mothers cite their daughters’ maturity as a primary factor in deciding whether and

when to acknowledge religious ambivalence or uncertainty. Several mothers in Halbertal's study describe their own religious education as strict and conservative at first, with simple, consistent explanations of the world and of God—ideas that encouraged questioning and thoughtful interrogation were introduced as they grew into adulthood. Many of these mothers intend to teach their daughters according to this model because they believe that one must have a solid commitment to the religion before questioning is safe for both the individual woman and the community (36). These mothers' stories illustrate the connection between images of God and the reality of women's lived experience. Mothers are expected to pass exclusively male images of God and scriptural texts articulating women's inferiority onto their daughters, transmitting not only the patriarchal culture but also the woundedness of being female within that culture. Christ, Sallie McFague, Elizabeth A. Johnson, and other feminist theologians have argued that affirming divine female power through female images of God can encourage bonds between women and heal the sense of lack caused when connection to the maternal is strained or denied. The loss, or lack, of a mother is prominent in Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. In each of these novels, characters struggle to remember and to reunite with lost maternal figures, connecting the pain they experience in their lives to the broken bond between mother and daughter. As the characters search for comfort and wisdom, the authors locate the source of healing power in semiotic communication between female entities that exceeds the limitations of the masculine language systems I have described in the previous chapter.

The distinction between the symbolic and semiotic that Julia Kristeva draws in *Revolution in Poetic Language* provides useful terms for this study, especially as she relates the semiotic to the maternal body. In the preverbal, pre-Oedipal stage of development, an infant cannot distinguish between self and other and all drives “connect and orient the body to the mother,” a state, or “receptacle,” which Kristeva calls the *chora* (27).<sup>25</sup> The semiotic *chora* is a “precondition of the symbolic,” preceding language and logic, but it remains a part of human communication, where bodily drives and energy are discharged through language. This transgression of the symbolic order through a complex “semiotic combinatorial system” is expressed through art, music, and poetry, as well as, Kristeva argues, religion (68). In the novels I analyze, women transcend the limitations of the symbolic by incorporating the semiotic. In each novel, a woman seeking lost maternal connections enters a space representing the semiotic *chora*, a figurative return to the womb, where she experiences a nourishing union with the mother and receives a kind of knowledge that she can integrate into the symbolic order that had dominated her and thereby re-establish herself as a subject.

In *Saving Grace*, Lee Smith creates Fannie as a character who consistently expresses faith in Jesus even while she questions and worries about the practices of the

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, among others, criticizes Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic *chora* for essentializing women and making motherhood compulsory. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, “Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female libidinal drive that constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality. Here Kristeva reifies maternity and then promotes this reification as the disruptive potential of the semiotic. As a result, the paternal law, understood as the ground of univocal signification, is displaced by an equally univocal signifier, the principle of the maternal body which remains self-identical in its teleology regardless of its ‘multiplicitous’ manifestations.” Answering Butler’s criticism, Kelly Oliver argues that Kristeva’s *chora* is a figure that is “not homogenous or univocal,” as “its meaning and function shift throughout her writings.” The *chora* is useful, Oliver claims, as a way of analyzing the discourse of maternity as one that “call[s] up a crisis in identity” (48).

church and her husband, Virgil, as its leader and the head of her family. Expressing her commitment to Virgil in the same words that she confesses her love for Jesus, Fannie is grateful to her husband for “saving her” from her life as a “dancing girl” and widowed young mother, and she publicly demonstrates her dedication to him and to the church by standing with him and reading scriptures while he preaches (Smith 23). Even though her commitment to the church begins with a commitment to Virgil, the reader sees evidence that she has her own religious faith, as she frequently prays and is “anointed” to handle fire in moments of religious ecstasy (25). Fannie draws comfort and at times euphoric joy from her religion and encourages her children to do the same.

Fannie’s daughter Gracie tells the reader repeatedly that she hates Jesus because her father’s commitment to preaching forces them to live a nomadic life of poverty and dependence on charity. Although Gracie labels Fannie a woman of strong faith in Jesus, the reader sees enough of Fannie’s pain to understand that she is not without her own doubts. When Fannie’s oldest daughter, Evelyn, dresses up in a wedding dress she has found in the attic of the house on Scrabble Creek, Fannie falls into devastated tears on the porch, crying, “I just want you girls to be happy,” as if she fears that happiness is an unachievable aspiration for her daughters. When she composes herself, she orders them, without explanation, to put the dress away and never get it out again (Smith 13). As a mother, Fannie recognizes that Virgil’s lifestyle has prevented their children from having friends, going to school consistently, and at times, having enough food and clothing. As a wife, Fannie has followed Virgil faithfully even as she hears of his sexual affairs and has to pay off Virgil’s pregnant mistresses with what little money she does



manage to save. The family's commitment to Virgil's evangelical mission (a calling to which Fannie submits as much as Virgil) and Virgil's abuse of his role as divinely-ordained head of the family prevent Fannie from providing a stable home for her children and make her feel trapped within a marriage corrupted by lies and sexual infidelity. Gracie frequently overhears Fannie talking to her friend Ruth Duty, often drawing strength from Ruth's companionship but at other times confessing that she might not be able to withstand the tests that God has placed in her life. Fannie does not talk to her children about her fears, doubts, and tests.

Smith portrays Fannie as having the "gift of discernment," despite her poor choice in a husband (15). Gracie believes that her mother can see the future, and later in the novel, Gracie finds that she has inherited that ability. Fannie's patience and empathy in her relationships with her children and her friends demonstrate, if not a spiritual power of discernment, an ability to intuit the needs of others and to offer comfort when needed. Despite Gracie's efforts to hide it, Fannie recognizes her daughter's anxieties and pain, affectionately calling her a "worrywart child":

"You've got to trust more in Jesus, Gracie," she'd tell me again and again in her pretty voice which always reminded me of running water, of Scrabble Creek falling down the mountain beside our house. "You've got to give over to Him," she'd say. "Hasn't He always took good care of us? The Lord will provide," she'd say, smoothing my long yellow hair and pressing me against her bosom where I could smell the

familiar smell of cotton dried out on the line. She'd hold me until I quit crying, maybe sing me a little song. (3)

Even as she echoes Virgil's words about Jesus, Fannie offers Gracie an alternative language by which to define and express religious and spiritual belief. While Virgil preaches on the primacy of the Word, Fannie communicates within a semiotic system that incorporates diverse sensorial experience into the message that she passes on to her daughter, binding the concept of Jesus to the security of a mother's embrace. As Fannie speaks, Gracie smells and feels her mother's body, and Smith emphasizes the emotional nourishment Fannie offers Gracie by creating an image reminiscent of a mother holding her infant to her breast. Gracie's tears and Fannie's song are semiotic discharges, not contained by language, and the musicality of Fannie's voice infuses the symbolic—the words she speaks—with the semiotic. When Fannie holds Gracie and comforts her, she tells her that Jesus always “took good care of us.” Just a few sentences later, at the end of the same paragraph, Gracie describes her mother in precisely the same words: “Mama took good care of us” (3). By juxtaposing these sentences, Smith creates the image not of a fatherly God but of a motherly God, fulfilling the same role that Fannie fulfills for her children. Through nonverbal communication evoking the innate connection between mother and child, Fannie creates a feeling of security and nurturing that allows Gracie to hear Fannie's words about Jesus in a context very different from that of her father's sermonizing.

Fannie's ways of teaching her daughters about God are best illustrated by a scene in which she tells the story of the church's first meeting while she washes and braids the

girls' hair. Gracie has two brothers, but Smith places this storytelling event in an exclusively female scene, emphasizing not just motherly nurturing but an exchange meant especially for daughters. While Fannie's religion certainly shapes her understanding of her role as mother to all of her children, the acts of passing the cultural traditions from one generation to another often happen separately, as there are different truths to be taught to boys and girls in this system. When Gracie narrates the story of the camp meeting, she tells the reader that "We heard it first from Mama" (18). Too young to attend, Gracie does not have her own memories of the meeting, so Fannie's retelling of it is the primary experience that she has of the event. The words that Fannie uses, which the reader receives repeated by Gracie, are accompanied at all times by the ritual of braiding hair. This activity includes the comforting touch of the mother's hands and also incorporates a subtle lesson in how to be a woman in the Shepherds' religious community. As in many Holiness and Pentecostal churches, the women and girls keep their hair long and wear it in a modest style that symbolizes acquiescence to the values of the church, both to other church members and to the outside world.<sup>26</sup> This lesson comes not from their father ordering them to maintain a specified appearance, which would carry the negative connotations Gracie associates with him and the church, but from their mother, who turns the ritual into an opportunity for emotional bonding and expressions of love for each other.

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<sup>26</sup> Elaine J. Lawless claims that the requirement of long hair carries more symbolic meaning than other Pentecostal dress codes. Simply styled long hair denotes holiness and an avoidance of "sexuality and the temptations of the world" (33).

Mediated by her mother's touch and voice, the scene at the meeting does not carry the anxiety that Gracie feels during her own experiences in the meetings, where she is afraid of the snakes that her father and other church members take up and prays to Jesus not to be filled with the spirit but to be spared from religious ecstasy, hoping she is never anointed.<sup>27</sup> By staging this story from Fannie's perspective, Smith allows the reader to see the meeting as a mystical event where people are filled with joy and enemies become brothers. The central character in Fannie's story is, of course, Virgil, and she portrays him to their daughters as a man to be admired; to her, he is part of a great mystery. Fannie quotes Virgil, so his words are still present, but they no longer stand as the only language by which to define God and religious experience. Fannie combines those words with her own observations of the people's faces and voices and the natural world that surrounds them. While she, like Virgil, cites the snake handling as evidence of the presence of God among them—"The Holy Spirit was so strong that night that three of the copperheads died from it, Mama said, right there in the service"—she also finds evidence in the beauty of the woods around them:

"And when the last one was baptized," Mama always said, "now that was Mrs. Goody Keene, don't you know that the moon broke out from behind the clouds and lit up that whole riverbank, bright as day! We could see every rock and pebble on the shore, and laughed at how Mrs. Keene had got so caught up in the Spirit that she had took her pocketbook right down in the river with her. We all rejoiced," Mama said, "and

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<sup>27</sup> Gracie rarely prays in earnest, but when she does her most frequent prayer is for Jesus to leave her and her mother alone.

thanked God for it, and the moon stayed out for the rest of the night. The road looked like a silver ribbon,” Mama said, “as we were coming home.”

Mama timed the story of the first brush arbor meeting so that it always ended when she got to the last rubber band. (22)

Most of the story that Gracie repeats is told without quotation marks, as a paraphrase of her mother’s words. These last sentences, however, are direct quotations of her mother, indicating that these words were spoken verbatim with every retelling and that they had the most impact on Gracie. At the end of this story, Smith presents elements of religious experience that are missing from Virgil’s interpretation of the human relationship with the divine. In Fannie’s telling, celebrating the joy of other people, finding humor within religious ecstasy, and seeing the presence of God in nature are integral to the experience of God. Fannie does not reject or undermine Virgil’s teachings or ways of worship; rather, she combines them with language and images that reflect her own understanding of the divine to create a fuller, more joyful, less frightening experience. Here God is not distant and future, to be met in heaven but present in creation, in nature and in humans. Within this framework, caring for people, feeding them, laughing with them, washing and braiding her daughters’ hair, and admiring the roses that grow up the side of their house are all means of approaching the divine. As she braids her hair, Fannie offers Gracie a definition of religion and of the divine that can be integrated into the religion that her father practices, so that Gracie might participate without the fear and resentment that makes her constantly doubt her own salvation.

To show that Fannie's spirituality is also her own and not merely her husband's, Smith provides a scene in which Fannie, who has never taken up snakes or drunk poison as other church members have, is moved to handle hot coals. One night in their home, the Shepherd family and their friends the Dutys sing hymns and dance in an informal praise meeting, with even Gracie joining in the celebration. Without warning, Fannie "flung her head back and started jerking and crying out in a scary way, no words, just sharp animal noises" (25). To Gracie's horror, Fannie runs to the heatstove and pulls out burning coals in her bare hands, dancing around the room. The adults pray aloud thanking Jesus for filling Fannie with the Holy Spirit, and Evelyn and Gracie fall to their knees. But Gracie does not pray. Instead she bangs her head on the floor thinking silently "I hate Jesus! I hate Jesus!" until she passes out. Most of the adults believe that Gracie faints because she is overwhelmed by the spirit of God, but Fannie knows that Gracie is angry that Jesus is burning her mother. Fannie describes her feelings to Gracie later, not simply to comfort her but in an effort to make her understand, persisting even when Gracie puts her hands over her ears: "Now you *listen* to me, Gracie . . . It was a perfect pleasure in the Lord, you silly girl!" (26). It is crucial to note here that Smith does not allow the reader to dismiss this scene as an act of fanaticism that can be explained in purely psychological terms. Fannie handles fire and she is not burned—"nary a blister" to show for the hot coals that had sat on her bare skin for several minutes (26). There is a real mystery at work in this scene, Smith suggests, and Gracie resists it with all the strength she has.

While Smith depicts an inexplicable mystery capable of inspiring ecstasy, the reader does not develop sympathy for the Shepherd family's religion, as the intensity of Gracie's torment cuts through Fannie's joy. Smith creates a constant tension between the Jesus Virgil serves and the Jesus Fannie loves, and every member of the Shepherd family faces the consequences of that tension, even forcing Fannie to choose between the lives of her children and the will of her husband, a point at which Fannie apparently loses her ability to reconcile the conflict within herself. When their youngest son, Troy Lee, falls terribly ill, Virgil insists that he can be healed through prayer even as the boy's health deteriorates. Fannie almost allows Joe Allen, her grown son and Virgil's stepson, to take Troy Lee to the hospital, but Virgil interrupts, invoking his position as head of the family and his faith in the healing power of prayer. Virgil characterizes Fannie's action not only as a betrayal of her husband but a rejection of God. As they fight, Fannie concedes to Virgil and actually begins to fight against Joe Allen until Gracie restrains her. Mother and children take sides against each other in a violent collision that marks a drastic and tragic shift in Fannie's relationship with her children and her ability to function in her daily life. When her faith conflicts with Virgil's, his word is final. Moreover, if Virgil speaks the Word of God, Fannie's children are damned when they rebel against it. Fannie bemoans this loss when she says to Gracie, "Oh Sissy, the devil has done claimed you for his own" (63). When it becomes impossible for Fannie's concept of God to survive in harmony with Virgil's, it becomes impossible for her to mother and, then, for her to live with herself. Every conflict between Fannie and Virgil is infused with religion, and with his charismatic personality and command of the

scripture, God seems always to be on Virgil's side. Smith makes clear that the stakes in this battle are always life and death, as the church members risk their lives to handle serpents and Troy Lee almost dies of scarlet fever. On the last night of the Homecoming revival, expected to be Virgil's greatest triumph, Ruth Duty is bitten by a snake, Virgil is arrested for endangering lives at his church meetings, and Fannie hangs herself in the barn. After Smith presents, through Fannie, the potential for a maternal vision of God, she shows the possibility for disaster when the feminine divine is smothered by strictly patriarchal religion that not only worships an exclusively male God but hails the dominance of men over women as righteous and holy. Virgil's worldview negates mothering, and in the end leaves Gracie motherless.

As Gracie grows up, Smith leads the reader to hope that the wounded daughter might be healed through her own motherhood. Motherhood comes "natural" for Gracie, and she says she is "the happiest [she] had ever been" (193). She has two children in two years, and with the help of her doting sisters-in-law, Gracie enjoys the day-to-day acts of mothering. She lies in the sun or splashes in a wading pool with her baby girls, admires their pretty faces, and relishes keeping them safe and happy—she "had turned out to be a fine little mother after all" (194). But Gracie, like Fannie, is mothering within a patriarchal religion, as the wife of a preacher whose word is law. Even though he is kind, his authority over her is a benevolent patriarchy. Gracie at times finds it harder to live with "a real saint like Travis Word" than "a plaster saint like Daddy" (197). Dramatically ending Gracie's idyllic maternity and bringing to the point of crisis the conflicts in her marriage to Travis, Smith has Gracie give birth to a still-born son.



The physical trauma renders her infertile, and Gracie fears that her “womb had turned poison and killed” her baby, ending with harsh finality the reproductive potential that had defined and comforted her since her marriage to Travis (199). This moment in Gracie’s life recalls Fannie’s crisis. Gracie’s daughters are close to the age that Gracie was when her mother died, and like Fannie, Gracie finds herself unable to carry on in her role as wife and mother. Again, Gracie hates God and rebels against the man who represents Him in her life. Indulging her sexual appetite, which had been repressed by her fearful and almost ascetic husband, Gracie begins an affair with Randy Newhouse, who “looked like a cross between Jesus and Kris Kristofferson” (218). Through Gracie’s narration, Smith comically merges the image of the divine in human form with a popular sex symbol in Gracie’s world, pointing to the possibility that Gracie might find not only sexual but also spiritual pleasure with the help of this man, an amoral atheist whose beliefs and behavior are as far as possible from those of Travis Word. Exhilarated, Gracie leaves her first tryst with Randy singing hymns and feeling like she “had been born again” (225). Gracie’s feeling of euphoria and renewal does not indicate that sex is her salvation or that she has found happiness merely in a relationship with a different man. It is clear from the beginning that Gracie’s relationship with Randy, an unlikeable and untrustworthy character, will be as dysfunctional as any Gracie has had. But her recognition of the sensual and spiritual possibilities in this extra-marital affair marks a break from her life as a preacher’s wife, the life that ended so disastrously for her mother.

To abandon her daughters appears to be antithetical to maternal responsibility, but Smith withholds judgment against her protagonist, demonstrating that it is necessary for Gracie to leave her marriage to break the dangerous continuum that crushed her own mother. Eventually leaving Randy, Gracie finds herself standing in the parking lot of a diner in Tennessee when she hears the sound of a crying baby. Looking for the baby, she wanders through Uncle Slidell's Christian Fun Golf, a bizarre Bible-themed putt-putt course, at the end of which is a plywood image of the Nativity, baby Jesus reaching out to her with "his chubby little arms" (248). Again, Smith creates a scene in which the mystery cannot be dismissed. Gracie does not look at the wooden baby and imagine him crying; she hears the cry and follows it to the baby, indicating a force at work external to her. This surreal scene recalls at once her grief and guilt over her own stillborn son and the intense hatred and fear she felt toward Jesus. In that image, religion and maternity reach out to her, and she knows she must return to Scrabble Creek to face her ghosts. Smith indicates that interpreting these signs in the context of the events in Gracie's life will be a long and difficult process, as she has Gracie purchase large amounts of food and toiletries in preparation for her deliberate endeavor. Stopping at the local grocery store also gives Gracie the opportunity to learn that her father's old church is still meeting when a member she knew as a child invites her to return: "It's the same old church. It's the same old God. There ain't no other way" (266). Frightened by that prospect, she adamantly refuses, and goes to the house on Scrabble Creek.

From inside the house, Gracie narrates her life story, and when the novel reaches this point, the sense of time changes and the narration shifts from past to present tense.

Gracie associates the home of her childhood with her “sweet young mama of old, who had told us stories and sung to us by the hour, and kissed all our hurts away” (113). The house exists beyond temporality; the only clock is broken and Gracie left her watch in Gatlinburg where she left the wooden baby Jesus crying in the snow. Gracie doesn’t know the day or how much time has passed. This place allows Gracie to exist in what Kristeva calls “women’s time,” a concept of “cyclical and monumental” time as opposed to a temporality that is teleological and linear:

On the one hand, this measure preserves cycles, gestation, and the eternal return of biological rhythm that is similar to the rhythm of nature. Its predictability can be shocking, but its simultaneity with what is experienced as extra-subjective and cosmic time is a source of resplendent visions and unnamable jouissance. On the other hand, it preserves a solid temporality that is faultless and impenetrable, one that has so little to do with linear time that the very term “temporality” seems inappropriate. (“Women’s Time” 354)

This concept of time is the culmination of Gracie’s renewed acknowledgement of the “gift of discernment” that she has inherited from her mother. When Fannie dies, Gracie immediately receives Fannie’s ability to perceive the world in past, present, and future at once. Gracie knows Fannie is dead before she sees her, and she “spoke the truth as it was given to [her]” when she ascertains Lamar’s role in Fannie’s death (Smith 113). But for the rest of her life, until she chooses to go back home, she ignores the knowledge that her mother passed on to her. Her gift of discernment returns as soon as she begins her

journey home, and its power increases as she gets closer to the house. With clarity, she sees Travis “putting a staple gun to his head” and the cancer growing in Carlton Duty’s chest “like a big bunch of grapes” (263, 268). Her mother possesses a special kind of knowledge, and reconnection with her makes that knowledge available to Gracie.

After several days Fannie comes to Gracie in a dream. “‘*Come to me Gracie,*’ she says, ‘*Oh, come to Jesus honey. It is time now, it is never too late*’” (269). Fannie’s voice is soft and it comes amid distant church bells, reminiscent of the young Fannie who, through her gentle, musical voice, encouraged Gracie to trust Jesus. As in Fannie’s story of the first camp meeting and the image of the wooden baby Jesus at the golf course, the religion of the father is merged with images and emotions of motherhood. Although Gracie had resisted Fannie’s urging as a child, her return to the house symbolizes her desire to return to her mother and accept her guidance; Gracie confirms this decision when she tells the reader, “I believe I will go to church today. I believe it is time” (270). Hereafter, the reader does not receive Fannie’s words, only Gracie’s response; no longer an external force speaking to her, Fannie’s guidance comes from within Gracie. Gracie removes her own clothes and puts on her mother’s dress, symbolically reentering her mother’s body. Gracie is in an altered state of consciousness that resembles Kristeva’s description of the semiotic *chora*. As a child within the womb, Gracie does not distinguish herself from her mother and seems to exist as both at the same time. Throughout the novel, Gracie has sought to claim a subject position by telling her story, as I described in the previous chapter. With Gracie as speaking subject, Fannie exists as the object of Gracie’s quest. In this scene, however, the lines between

subject and object are erased. This reunion of mother and daughter is the climax of what Marianne Hirsch calls the “feminist family romance”: “Presymbolic and pre-cultural, it points to an alternative to patriarchy and logos—a world of shared female knowledge and experience in which subject/object dualism and power relationships might be challenged and redefined” (133).<sup>28</sup> Alone with the spirit of her mother, her words are thoughts, not expressed aloud. Fannie’s instructions and Gracie’s response come from the same place. Without the need to speak, Gracie experiences her surroundings through physical sensation, the exhilarating cold of the winter air and the comforting warmth of the stove. In this state, Gracie also feels reconnected with her siblings, the others who once existed within Fannie’s womb, and remembers a time when they were happy together. Gracie waits by the stove until it is time to go to church, and she measures the hour not by the clock but by the light from outside, further allowing nature and sensory experience to inform her perception of the world and indicate to her when it is time to act. She suddenly feels a frightening sensation:

The Spirit comes down on me hard, like a blow to the top of my head and runs all over my body like lightning. My fingers and toes are on fire. Oh Lord, it is hard to breathe and I am scared, Lord, I am so scared but I will let my hands do what they are drawing now to do and it does not hurt, it is a joy in the Lord as she said. It is a joy which spreads all through my body, all through this sinful old body of mine. (271)

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<sup>28</sup> While Hirsch identifies the “feminist family romance” as an important response to Freud’s Oedipal family romance, she also notes that in a pre-Oedipal model the primary focus remains on the daughter, and the mother’s subjectivity is still not fully recognized.

As her mother did many years before, Gracie holds burning coals in her hands, feeling an energizing euphoria that she does not feel the need to question.

By taking up the coals, Gracie accepts the inheritance that she had resisted throughout her childhood. The first scene of Fannie's anointment occurs in Virgil's presence during a prayer meeting that he leads in their home. When Smith reprises this event, she removes Virgil and transforms the act into a female spiritual experience; the patriarchal religion becomes a matrilineal inheritance passed from mother to daughter. Gracie reminds the reader that she has never been baptized, never been saved by the churches of her father or husband. Her first sensation of being "born again" comes when she reclaims the pleasure possible in her own body through her sexual relationship with Randy Newhouse, in a union of the male and female body that seeks pleasure for both. When Gracie accepts Fannie's spiritual legacy, she again feels joy in her body. Linda J. Byrd-Cook identifies "water and cave imagery throughout the novel [which] suggest[s] the presence of the maternal, sexual Great Mother Goddess and the mysterious life-creating moisture of her womb from which all life emerges" (107). After holding the coals, Gracie drinks from Scrabble Creek, which she has repeatedly identified with her mother and which Byrd-Cook calls "the sweet water of the Goddess" (109). Byrd-Cook interprets Gracie's communion with her mother's spirit and her anointment to take up the coals as Gracie's reconciliation with the Great Mother Goddess and the recognition of the divine within herself. However, while Gracie's religious ecstasy is encouraged by her mother's spirit, Fannie leads Gracie to *Jesus*, the masculine deity whom Gracie once feared and hated. When Gracie leaves the house, she is symbolically born again,

emerging from this site of maternal power, but this rebirth is the kind that Virgil and all of his church members had sought, as well—rebirth in Jesus. Gracie has told us that she will go to church, and Smith hints that she will go specifically to the snake-handling Jesus Name Church—to “the same old God” (266). The divine has appeared to Gracie in the form of her mother, and Gracie will merge that image with the male image of Jesus to create a new and broader understanding of Christianity and its potential for healing her emotional pain. Gracie affirms her place in the matrilineal heritage as she walks down the steps from the house. Laughing, she thinks, “I *am* happy Mama, I am,” and after realizing that she had not yet eaten, she remembers “I always made sure my girls got a good breakfast” (272). As a daughter and mother of daughters, Gracie locates herself in a female continuum of nurturing and nourishing, which she now ties directly to the joy she finds in Jesus.

The last few pages of *Saving Grace* are full of hope and optimism, but Gracie’s return to church is troubling.<sup>29</sup> Despite Gracie’s joy, Smith has given us no reason to expect that any positive experience awaits Gracie. Consistently throughout the novel, the church has been connected with abuse and oppression. The characters who most exemplify the positive potential of religion are Carlton and Ruth Duty, who base their unselfish acts of giving and nurturing on a concept of Christian charity. Even these characters choose to leave the church started by Virgil Shepherd. Gracie’s epiphany and subsequent “redemption” are difficult to accept in light of the tragedy that surrounds

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<sup>29</sup> Some critics resist this move by Smith to return her protagonist to church, claiming that the ending is left ambiguous and that we aren’t sure where Gracie is going, despite Gracie’s announcing outright that she intends to go to church and is only waiting at the house because she has awakened too early for services. Some have gone as far as to ask Smith herself to clarify the ending, only to be assured that Gracie is indeed headed to church as she drives away from the house.

her—Virgil’s physical and verbal abuse of Fannie, Fannie’s suicide, and Gracie’s sexual molestation by her half-brother all occurred while their family was committed to serving Jesus. The optimistic tone of this passage resists the interpretation that Gracie’s return to religion dooms her to Fannie’s fate, but Smith has offered us little on which to base a more hopeful interpretation. To believe that Gracie has found an answer that resolves any of the conflicts that religion has brought into her life requires us to forget the abuse and violence that make up the bulk of this novel.

In her influential book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Elizabeth A. Johnson asserts that “inequality is not redressed” by introducing feminine aspects of God “but subtly furthered, as the androcentric image of God remains in place, made more appealing through the subordinate inclusion of feminine traits” (49). I have argued that Smith, through combining the masculine language of the father with the semiotic communication of the mother, offers a concept of a motherly God to augment the image of God the Father that is corrupted by Gracie’s negative experiences with human men. In doing so, Smith imagines God not as a female entity but as “a more wholistic male person who has integrated his feminine side” (Johnson 48). Her union with her mother leads her, after all, to Jesus. Johnson also addresses the Mother of God, another image that religious thinkers have proposed as a solution to the gender inequality inherent in the concept of God as exclusively and literally male. She points out that the Mother of God is only divine *in relation to* the male God and does not stand on equal footing with him. In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva analyzes the Virgin Mary, primarily as she is represented in Catholicism. Freed from original sin by her own immaculate



conception and from death by her bodily assumption into heaven, Mary overcomes death and restores the semiotic—the mother’s “milk and tears”—to a religion that is founded on “the Word”:

Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and stead of death and thought. This love, of which divine love is merely a not always convincing derivation, psychologically is perhaps a recall, on the near side of early identifications, of the primal shelter that insured the survival of the newborn . . . The possibility of communication having been swept away, only the subtle gamut of sound, touch, and visual traces, older than language and newly worked out, are preserved as an ultimate shield against death. (327)

As fruitful as this image is, Kristeva claims, it is marked by masochism and sacrifice. The Virgin restores the semiotic only to control it; her relationship to her child is her relationship to God and she must always subjugate herself to Him. A woman’s identification with the Virgin “sacrifices an identification with the semiotic maternal body for an identification with the symbolic mother, a paternal mother” (Oliver 52). Because the image of the Mother of God is so limited, Johnson argues that “only equivalent images of God male and female can in the end do greater justice to the dignity of women and the truth of holy mystery” (47). One image with great imaginative potential is that of Mother God:

Since it is women whose bodies bear, nourish, and deliver new persons into life and, as society is traditionally structured, are most often charged with the responsibility to nurture and raise them into maturity, language about God as mother carries a unique power to express human relationship to the mystery who generates and cares for everything. (171)

Imagining a Mother God,<sup>30</sup> rather than the Mother of God, has the potential to access the rich history and symbolism of Mary while freeing her from the limited role that necessarily situates her in a subordinate position to her son. It also, as I will show in my reading of Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, opens up the possibility of a divine relationship between mother and daughter.

Kidd's novel revises the image of Mary, transforming the marginalized and masochistic Mary into a powerful force who is not *merely* Mother of God but, like a queen bee, "the mother of thousands" (149). Through *Our Lady of Chains*, Kidd imagines one form that Mother God might take, beginning with the Mary of Christian tradition and amplifying her symbolic power. Kidd draws on the tradition of the Black Madonna, an image that anthropologist Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba describes as "a fluid syncretic blend of the Virgin Mary and Ancient Mother Goddesses from Eurasian, Native American, and African cultures who is worshipped and adored by millions of people from around the world" (9). Two of the most famous Black Madonna icons are

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<sup>30</sup> I have chosen to use the word Mother God here to indicate a specific but not exclusive female construct to represent divinity. The word God is insufficient because it is used almost exclusively to describe a male image. Rosemary Radford Reuther calls attention to the implied masculinity of the word God when she uses the term "God/ess," which she defines as "a written [not spoken] symbol intended to combine both the masculine and feminine forms of the word for the divine while preserving the Judeo-Christian affirmation that divinity is one" (46).

Poland's Our Lady of Czestochowa and Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe, both standing in their cultures as champions for justice and defenders of the weak and dispossessed. Our Lady of Chains, the most prominent Black Madonna image in the novel, likewise represents an "indomitable spirit" that offers hope to a disenfranchised community (Emanuel 118). Standing in the parlor of the Boatwright sisters' pink house, Our Lady (as the novel's characters more affectionately call her) is a figurehead broken from an old ship:

She was black as she could be, twisted like driftwood from being out in the weather, her face a map of all the storms and journeys she'd been through. Her right arm was raised, as if she was pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist. It gave her a serious look, like she would straighten you out if necessary . . . She had a faded red heart painted on her breast and a yellow crescent moon, worn down and crooked, painted where her body would have blended into the ship's wood. A candle inside a tall red glass threw glints and glimmers across her body. She was a mix of mighty and humble all in one. (Kidd 70)

While the statue's origins are unknown, August Boatwright retells the story of how it came to be called Our Lady of Chains as the story was passed down to her from her grandmother. The statue, as the story goes, was found washed ashore by a slave and became a symbol of hope for the slave community that possessed it. The community believed that the statue was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had come to bring them comfort, and each time the slave owner attempted to take the statue away and chain it

up, it reappeared in the slaves' praise house. She was called Our Lady of Chains "not because she *wore* chains" but "because *she broke them*" (110). The center of a small prayer circle called the Daughters of Mary, the statue and the story that accompanies it establish a matrilineal and woman-centered religion with foundations in Christianity and in the shared history of African slavery. Setting the novel in South Carolina just after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and incorporating events of racially-motivated violence into the plot, Kidd reiterates the continued need for a symbol of strength among abused and marginalized people. Our Lady's prayer circle is small but the diversity of her adherents indicates a great potential; while most of the supplicants are African American women, Kidd includes three African American men<sup>31</sup> and a young white girl, Lily, to demonstrate that all people who need comfort might find it in this powerful maternal symbol.

In addition to the Our Lady of Chains statue, Lily's "black Mary" picture functions as another ever-present emblem of the Black Madonna. Lily's picture has many origins. First, it is a relic of her dead mother, a symbol of the unconditional parental love that Lily desperately desires. Like Smith's Gracie, Lily longs for her mother and blames herself for her mother's death. Her journey to learn about her mother and to understand her own identity is guided by the "black Mary" picture, which Lily finds in a box of her mother's possessions, with the words "Tiburón, SC" written on the back. Lily later learns that the picture is the label for Black Madonna honey, the product

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<sup>31</sup> During her first meeting with the Daughters, Lily notes that Mary had "one son besides Jesus, a man named Otis Hill," but it becomes clear later in the novel that the boy Zachary and June's fiancée Neil actively participate in the rituals and observances, as well.

of the female-centered world of the beehive, harvested by the woman who would become one of Lily's many surrogate mothers and who had been such a mother figure for Lily's own mother. Before she was the symbol for Black Madonna honey, this black Mary was a relic of August's mother, who collected Catholic prayer cards with images of various European Black Madonnas. The favorite Black Madonna, which August chooses to adorn her honey jars, is called the Black Madonna of Breznichar in Bohemia. Adding another layer of origin to the black Mary, August purchases the Black Madonna labels as souvenir stickers from the Holy Virgin Monastery Gift Shop, affixing her business name as a second sticker on each jar. The existence of the Holy Virgin monastery and the availability of the prayer cards and stickers implies that the Black Madonna's relevance reaches beyond the small, iconoclastic group of women in South Carolina to a globally and historically significant image, connecting the Daughters of Mary to a world of people who love and revere Mary. While Kidd could have chosen from among many actual Black Madonna images that exist in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, she creates the fictional Black Madonna of Breznichar in Bohemia. Using this image, Kidd invokes the Christian Mary and pre-Christian Mother Goddess traditions without the limitations that a specific historical/religious icon might carry. Kidd imaginatively engages the concept of Mother God and creates a figure of parental love and feminine divinity. Likewise, she dramatizes her characters performing such imaginative work.

The novel's Black Madonnas and the rituals that surround them are a combination of tradition and invention. The Christian influences are clear and

unquestioned; the characters call the images that they revere Mary, the mother of Jesus, and connect her directly to the Christian story of the first Christmas. Lily immediately, and somewhat mysteriously, recognizes both the black Mary picture and the Our Lady statue as Mary even though they look very different from each other and from the images of Mary that she had seen in the Christmas nativity scenes in her church. In the Baptist church Lily had attended, they “didn’t really allow Mary [. . .] except at Christmas,” but Mary is a central figure to the Daughters of Mary. Drawing from Catholic traditions that revere Mary, the Daughters use rosary beads and recite Catholic prayers before Our Lady. The first time that August explains her religious practices to Lily, she says that she and her sisters “take our mother’s Catholicism and mix in our own ingredients” (90). Later August complicates this oversimplified explanation when she reveals that Our Lady, passed down from mother to daughter for at least three generations, precedes her mother’s Catholicism: “I think the statue was the reason Mother became a Catholic, so she could kneel down before her and not feel like she was doing anything peculiar” (142). Instead of representing a learned devotion to Mary in an established and familiar religious context, Kidd emphasizes that it is the yearning for a Holy Mother that attracts the characters to Mary, Our Lady of Chains, and the legitimized rituals of Catholicism.

Contrasting the teleological history of Christianity, the male lineage outlined meticulously in the Bible and projected to the end of the world, the history of Our Lady of Chains, both the statue and the specific reverence for Mary that it symbolizes, is cyclical. Kidd leaves the true origin of the statue unknown so there is no beginning

point. The arrival of the statue in the slave community has the potential to become the beginning point that starts the trajectory toward the Daughters of Mary in the pink house. Kidd undermines that potential, however, when she has August explain to Lily that Our Lady is “really just the figurehead off an old ship, but the people needed comfort and rescue, so when they looked at it, they saw Mary, and so the spirit of Mary took it over” (141). This explanation clarifies the Daughters’ belief that the statue is not intrinsically divine but that divinity is projected upon it. The origin of Our Lady of Chains is not truly the moment that the statue washed up on shore but actually within the slaves themselves, in their desire for a symbol of hope and liberation. The story is passed from August’s grandmother, word for word, to August and her mother, who also read the Bible and employ scripture in their efforts to understand and commune with Mary. It cannot be said that they seek out Mary because they are Christians nor can it be said that they seek out Christianity because they love Mary; both and neither are true. The development of the religion that August practices is not a traceable linear trajectory but a constant, creative exchange among racial heritage, Christianity, family tradition, and individual need.

The centrality of Mary in the characters’ lives eclipses the role of Jesus in their religion. At times, Kidd deliberately marginalizes Jesus. When Lily first shows Rosaleen the black Mary picture, she speculates about Rosaleen’s unspoken reaction: “I could read her thought: *If Jesus’ mother is black, how come we only know about the white Mary?* This would be like women finding out Jesus had had a twin sister who’d

gotten half God's genes but none of the glory" (52).<sup>32</sup> Imagining the implications of a daughter of God, Kidd portrays both an internalized sense of female lack and the potential for an image of a divine female to fill that lack. At the same time, she suggests that Jesus is an inadequate image of the divine. Later, this image is reprised when August tells of her mother talking to Our Lady as if they were friends, saying, "You know what? You should've had a girl instead" (142). While Kidd never has her characters explicitly question the presumed gender of God the Father in this novel, the imagined reversals of Jesus' gender work in two ways: by proposing that the female can embody divinity as effectively as the male and by suggesting that Jesus as deity is tangential to the divinity of Mary, not the source of it, and can be, as a result, dismissed altogether. Lily articulates this idea when, after May's death, she silently prays for May to tell Mary that they are remembering Mary even though "Jesus is the main one down here" (201). In this prayer, Lily wishes to replace Jesus with Mary as the center of her religious life, with apparently no fear of eternal consequences. While she comments from time to time that other people, including the Pope and her hometown Baptist preacher, might find the Daughters of Mary's practices strange, she never expresses fear that participating in those practices might lead to damnation or that they might displease God at all. Couching this alternative religion in the familiar language of Christianity, including the acceptance of the Bible as Holy Scripture, softens what would surely be seen by many Christians as blasphemy and idolatry.

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<sup>32</sup> Kidd's suggestion of Jesus's sister is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *Judith Shakespeare*. Just as Woolf imagines Shakespeare's gifted sister rejected and silenced because of her sex, Lily imagines Jesus's sister as one who is denied her rightful divine inheritance because she is female.



An important result of the decentering of Jesus in favor of the specific image of Our Lady of Chains is the removal of the sacrificial savior. Standing as the exemplar of original sin at the beginning of the novel, Lily is obsessed with the knowledge that she accidentally killed her mother with a gun when she was four years old. Her first moment of awareness is dominated by a sin for which she is constantly begging forgiveness years later, and her journey toward Tiburon, South Carolina, and away from her abusive father begins as a two-fold need to connect with her lost mother and to gain forgiveness from the one who died for that enormous sin. Kidd delays Lily's reconnection with her biological mother until Lily has had the time to adopt Our Lady as her spiritual mother and August Boatwright as her primary caregiver. When Lily finally asks August about her mother, Deborah, she learns that Deborah once abandoned her while fleeing an unhappy marriage to Lily's father. Kidd does not place a value judgment on this abandonment but provokes a great deal of sympathy for Deborah as well as for Lily. Turning for comfort to the Our Lady of Chains statue and realizing that the statue could do nothing to change the terrible circumstances she faces, Lily imagines that Our Lady can provide sympathy and comfort and decides that she "prefer[s] someone to understand [her] situation, even though she was helpless to fix it, rather than the other way around" (258). In the rage that follows, Lily reveals that she no longer asks to be saved or forgiven. The possibility of a perfect human mother is dashed by Deborah's abandonment of Lily and the terrible consequences of that abandonment. At the same time, Kidd encourages understanding of that choice by describing the serious depression that Deborah experiences before leaving her husband and child. Deborah clearly has the

option to sacrifice her happiness and health for her child, but she chooses to leave so that she can recover. Kidd presents a complex vision of maternity that is loving and nurturing but not self-sacrificing.

As Gracie does in Smith's *Saving Grace*, Lily imagines a return to the womb, but Lily does not imagine returning to her biological mother's body. In a shocked state following the revelations about her mother, Lily wills herself to dream that "a little door in the black Mary statue would open up, just over her abdomen, and I would crawl inside to a hidden room . . . tucked away in the secret world of consolation" (260). Lily wishes to connect to a strong maternal force that can offer without fail the strength and comfort she desires. Basing her image of Mary's womb on a work of art from one of August's books, Lily pictures many people huddled together in Mary's hidden room. In this picture, Lily joins with Mary as well as all those who have sought her before. In her memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Kidd describes a dream she had of giving birth to herself—she was "the baby and the mother both" (10). She interprets this dream as the beginning of her spiritual awakening, the birth of herself as "a true, instinctual, powerful woman who is rooted in her own feminine center, who honors the sacredness of the feminine, and who speaks the feminine language of her own soul" (12). As infant, she gradually grows and develops into this new woman, and as mother she nurtures the new awareness and adapts her life and her relationships to make room for it to thrive. In the novel, when Lily dreams of entering the womb of Our Lady of Chains, she begins the process of forgiving her mother and herself. Lily learns to connect not only with her biological mother but also the adoptive mothers who take her in and the divine mother to

whom they pray. She also learns to mother herself, to understand her own needs and to nurture herself, as Kidd describes in the metaphors of conception, labor, and childbirth she uses in her memoir. In “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva proposes a concept of ethics—a “herethics”—grounded in the ambiguous subjectivity experienced in pregnancy when the child is known by the mother as simultaneously self and other (332). Herethics, Kelly Oliver explains, “sets up one’s obligations to the other as obligations to the self and obligations to the species” (66). Lily’s dream of returning to the womb of a divine mother shows that she recognizes herself as deserving of maternal love and also locates her within a human continuum of need and care based not (only) on biological mother-daughter relationships but on a concept of the interconnectedness of all people.

Kidd puts the final articulation of divine maternal power in the words of August Boatwright, the character who comes closest to embodying the Black Madonna in human form. August tells Lily that Our Lady is neither “some magical being” nor the statue in the parlor but a power inside herself:

You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still need to find this part of ourselves inside . . . You don’t have to put your hand on Mary’s heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need to get through life . . . You can place it on your own heart. *Your own heart.* . . . All those times your father treated you mean, Our Lady was the voice inside you that said, “No, I will not bow down to this. I am Lily Melissa Owens, I will not bow down.” (288)

This statement presents a belief in self-love and self-reliance as the primary source of strength and fulfillment. Just as August explains that the statue became Mary when the slaves projected that identity onto it, she here tells Lily that Mary is not a divine entity that exists independent of earthly humans but a projection of the maternal power that Lily recognizes within herself. This explanation of the divine is similar to William James' explanation of the role of the subconscious in religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. As James describes it, when a person experiences a sense of lack, he or she can identify a different and better part of oneself:

He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck. (James 499)

Mary is a vehicle by which the Daughters access their own strength and power, but as August explains, Mary can be imagined to exist within a person's own body, speaking with a comforting voice that tells her she is not alone.

Kidd performs an artful dance here, presenting a belief system that is antithetical to belief in God as a distinct entity but couching it in terms that are not immediately offensive to or even incompatible with Christian sensibilities. The imagery of Jesus residing in the human heart is common among evangelizing and testifying Christians,

appearing in scripture, sermons, hymns, and even casual speech.<sup>33</sup> While the notion of Mary living in one's heart is unusual, to Protestant and Catholic alike, Kidd has eased the reader into that image over the course of the novel, gradually replacing the figure of Jesus as the human embodiment of God with that of Mary. Kidd carries her protagonist from an abusive, sexist, and racist patriarchy supported by the social and political atmosphere of the 1960s South and enabled by many Southern churches to a woman-centered community practicing a woman-centered religion, legitimizing the new belief system with scriptural, ritualistic, and symbolic ties to Christianity. Once she has established the empowering possibilities of the feminine divine, she widens the scope of divinity to include each individual human life, dramatizing a humanistic (while still vaguely Christian) and infinitely malleable spiritual framework.

Both Kidd and Smith portray feminine divinity grounded in Christianity, but where Smith reconciles divine maternal power with the male God, Kidd works to elevate the maternal so that it is no longer subordinated within paternal religion. In *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor pushes the image of a divine mother further by separating it completely from Christian tradition. Naylor does not displace the Christian Father God in favor of the Mother God, nor does she reconcile the two. Instead, she allows the two entities to coexist without the constraint of justifying one's existence in terms of the other, taking

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<sup>33</sup> “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; *That Christ may dwell in your hearts* by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19, emphasis mine).

for granted the presence of both. Sapphira Wade, the “great, grand, Mother,” is introduced on a genealogy chart before the first page of the narrative (48). Sapphira’s name is at the top of the chart, with a birth year of 1799 but no death year. Below her are her seven sons, and an asterisk on the name of her seventh explains the family surname, Day, which the matriarch chooses only at the birth of that son: “God rested on the seventh day and so would she.” Naming her sons after Old Testament prophets, a tradition carried on by her seventh son who names his seven sons after New Testament apostles, Sapphira honors the God of the Bible while at the same time establishing a parallel between that God and herself. She is “the Mother who began the Days” (262). The first page of the narrative elaborates on this creation myth: the slave and wife/concubine of Bascombe Wade, Sapphira convinces him to deed the island of Willow Springs to his slaves and then kills him, thereby freeing herself and the generations that follow and single-handedly creating the community of Willow Springs, a place that exists independent of any state government, as it is located off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina but cannot be legally claimed by either state. The residents of Willow Springs are practicing Christians who read the Bible, go to church, and pray to a benevolent Father God, but they also revere the Mother Creator of their world, to whom they attribute magical and fearsome powers and whose spirit pervades their daily activities. She exists among them as they are “sitting on [their] porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car” (10). Naylor sets up clear distinctions between the world of Willow Springs and that of the mainland, and when Christianity conflicts with the spiritual world of the island, it is the

outsiders who notice the differences. “Outside preachers who think they know more than they do” discourage the practice of Candle Walk, the island’s alternative to Christmas that celebrates Sapphira’s spirit, while even the most devout Christian islanders continue to participate in Candle Walk happily every year. When a young boy dies, the islanders hold a memorial ceremony in the church, and only the New Yorker George is troubled by the discontinuity between the Christian beliefs represented by the location of the service and the folk beliefs that the islanders’ words exemplify. George narrates this scene: “Why did I get the feeling that this meeting wasn’t meant to take place inside of any building? The church, the presence of the minister, were concessions, and obviously the only ones they were going to make to a Christian ritual that should have called for a sermon, music, tears—the belief in an earthly finality for the child’s life” (269). The islanders speak about the next time they will see the boy, attesting to a belief that the dead continue to move among them. Although, to George, this belief seems incompatible with the Christian belief that the soul leaves the earth when the body dies, the natives of Willow Springs neither acknowledge nor resolve apparently disparate beliefs and practices.

Naylor’s invocation of the biblical creation story calls attention to the sharp contrast between the Christian Bible—the Word—and the story of Sapphira, who “don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (4). The narrator<sup>34</sup> reveals that no one speaks or even knows the name of Sapphira Wade, but merely existing on the

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<sup>34</sup> In this section, the narrator is an omniscient member of the Willow Springs community, perhaps the spirit of the island itself, who addresses the reader directly. Two other narrators alternate with this voice, Cocoa and George, who address each other in conversation, George speaking from his grave in the Day family cemetery and Cocoa speaking to his spirit as she visits the cemetery.

island gives them access to her legend. The narrator articulates several versions of the legend throughout the novel, but none stands as the official or authoritative truth because “it ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies” (3). In some ways, the Christian God exists in the realm of language while Sapphira occupies a nonlinguistic, or semiotic, space, but this dichotomy is not consistently upheld.

Naylor portrays several characters in the novel as engaged with Christianity as word and law. Miranda and Abigail read and recite scripture and speak prayers to the Christian God. Pearl faithfully attends church services and points out the failure of others to live up to Christian ideals. Miranda also criticizes the tendency of church-going people to be “overly sanctimonious,” or more harshly, “Bible-thumping idiot[s],” as when she hears that Pearl sees her daughter-in-law Bernice’s infertility as punishment from God for going dancing (70, 72). Miranda recognizes the potential for the Bible and organized religion to offer positive guidance and comfort as well as the danger of words being misinterpreted or corrupted to do harm to individuals and to the community. At the same time, Miranda recognizes the Christian God as an extra-linguistic entity that is active and visible in nature. Watching a sunset during a “slow fall,” Miranda thinks,

It seems like God reached way down into his box of paints, found the purest reds, the deepest purples, and a dab of midnight blue, then just kinda trailed his fingers along the curve of the horizon and let ‘em all bleed down. And when them streaks of color hit the hush-a-bye green of the marsh grass with the blue of The Sound behind ‘em, you ain’t never had to set foot in a church to know you looking at a living prayer. (78)



This description of the actions of God characterizes his power as artistic creation; Naylor transforms the linguistic act of prayer into a “living” work of visual art, given from God to humans. Miranda believes that God is active in nature and intensely concerned with how humans use nature. Miranda knows that she has a reputation as a “conjure woman” but dismisses the perceived magic in her medicinal use of herbs and roots as nothing more than advanced knowledge of the natural properties of plants, “knowing how to get under, around, and beside nature to give it a slight push” but “never try[ing] to get *over* nature” (262). When Miranda agrees to treat Bernice for infertility, she wonders if she is committing a transgression for which God might not forgive her, but she reassures herself that she is actually not doing anything to change nature, only helping Bernice to achieve the mindset that would open her to conceiving a child.<sup>35</sup>

Sapphira holds an even more complex position. She is both named and nameless. The narrator emphasizes repeatedly that no one speaks or even knows her name. They know the name of Bascombe Wade because it is carved in the tombstone that overlooks The Sound, but Sapphira transcends death and so has no grave on the island. The name Sapphira is a slave name imposed upon her by some master and recorded only on a bill of sale that transferred her to Bascombe Wade. As a slave name “Sapphira Wade” is invalidated because everyone on the island understands that she was no slave, as Bascombe Wade owned her “only in body, not in mind” (206). Sapphira herself rejects his name even though he likely fathered at least some of her children.

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<sup>35</sup> In *Faithful Vision*, James Coleman analyzes the relationship between Christianity and hoo-doo in *Mama Day*. He argues that the novel reflects an attitude of disbelief but “underlying respect” toward hoo-doo that is common in parts of African American culture.

When Miranda finds Bascombe Wade's ledger hidden at "the other place," water damage has worn away Sapphira's name. As Miranda holds it, she knows that "the paper, itself, means nothing" because "all Willow Springs knows that this woman was nobody's slave" (280). Still, she tries intently to discern the missing words and especially the name, feeling a profound sense of loss. The paper, the only place where Sapphira exists in words, is both meaningless and fraught with meaning. As much as the narrator stresses Sapphira's existence outside the realm of language, Naylor not only tells the reader the name of the nameless Mother but also provides for the reader the full text of that lost document. Despite the narrator's statement that "nobody talks" about Sapphira, Miranda and Cocoa both speak the story as they understand it aloud to George. While Sapphira has no singular text like the Bible to lay out her truth, her story is indeed verbalized many times in various voices, and of course, is brought to the reader in the text of the novel. Indeed, Sapphira's greatest achievement is one that exists as a linguistic and legal act: the will that gave the people of Willow Springs their land and their freedom. In the character of Sapphira, Naylor offers the reader a paradox that is powerful because it cannot be categorized, nor can the relationship between Sapphira and the Christian God be statically defined.

Naylor's extensive use of both Christian text and African religion as sources for the two religious strains in the novel has been analyzed widely by critics. Adrian L. Ivey and Shirley Stave both outline Naylor's Biblical revisions as strategies for challenging dominant ideology. Monica Coleman and Lindsey Tucker, in their studies of *Mama Day*, describe how the Gullah culture of the Sea Islands, influenced by the Bakonga and

Yuruba religions in Africa, informs Naylor's construction of the fictional island of Willow Springs and her representation of conjure, while Amy K. Levin traces Naylor's representation of female solidarity to West African women's secret societies. In addition to the interweaving of this rich source material, Julie Tharp argues that *Mama Day*, like all "mother-centered literature by African American women," must also be read in the context of the realities of many African American mothers who were forced historically by slavery and later by economic necessity to leave their own children in the care of others. Naylor's Sapphira encompasses many of these references, as a reviser of the biblical creation story, an image of the conjure woman, and as a powerful mother who works to "[close] the wounds of the bereft mother and child" (Tharp 121). The complex interweaving of historical, cultural, and religious heritage disrupts and challenges cultural assumptions to demonstrate the powerful potential of a fluid concept of creation and the divine, especially as it allows for the recognition of creative as well as destructive maternal power.

*Mama Day* is a novel with at once a lack and an abundance of mothers. George and Cocoa are both the children of dead mothers and run-away fathers, and Miranda and Abigail even in old age mourn and resent the loss of their mother who went mad and committed suicide in grief over the death of their sister. But Cocoa's loss of her biological mother is tempered by the presence of two strong "othermothers," her grandmother Abigail and her great-aunt Miranda.<sup>36</sup> Known to her niece and all of the

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<sup>36</sup> In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Collins Hills writes, "In many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-

inhabitants of Willow Springs as Mama Day even though she has never had a biological child, Miranda serves as “othermother” for the entire island. The novel asks the reader to extend the definition of mother beyond biological definitions, beyond the definition of care-giver, and beyond any notions of ideal, purely benevolent motherhood.

Motherhood in the world of the novel can be nurturing and beneficial or dangerous and even hateful, but the connection to a mother is essential to understanding individual and cultural identity, as Naylor emphasizes the role of ancestral connections. The character who knows the least about his family heritage (and suffers most from this lack) is George, the orphaned son of a prostitute and an unknown father. George recognizes the formative role of a prominent “othermother” in his life, Mrs. Jackson of the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys, and internalizes her aphorism, “only the present has potential, *sir*” (23). He expresses the pain of his lost history in conscious and unconscious ways. When he realizes that Cocoa’s sensitivity about her skin color is based on her knowledge that she is likely the descendant of a white slave owner, he envies her shame because it is the unique “privilege” of “a heritage intact and solid enough to be able to walk over the same ground that [her] grandfather did” (219). Elizabeth T. Hayes notes the unconscious manifestations of George’s troubled relationship with the maternal, including defensive or emotional reactions to Cocoa’s breasts, those that he hopes one day will nurse his children, as well as his irrational fear of chickens and avoidance of

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American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Troester 1984).” (178)

eggs (672). Ultimately, George's stubborn self-reliance built upon his inability to locate himself within a heritage prevents him from trusting the maternal power that Miranda hopes to use to save both George and Cocoa, and he dies, literally of a broken heart.

While the maternal has great supernatural power in the world of *Mama Day*, it is not always a benevolent force. The Day family has a legacy of both love and hate, and the living members of the family are affected by these extreme passions of their foremothers. Miranda and Abigail's mother, Ophelia, devastates their father when she kills herself, and Cocoa's mother, Grace, full of hate for the man who left her while she was pregnant, names her daughter Ophelia (Cocoa's given name) in the hope that she, too, will break men's hearts. Love and hate exist in the acts of both of these women, as they do in the legendary acts of Sapphira, and Naylor sets up a confrontation between maternal forces, as Ruby and Miranda become rival conjurers pitting maternal hate against maternal love. In a grotesque inversion of a maternal act, Ruby braids Cocoa's hair while soaking her scalp in poisonous oils. Distracted by her fight with George, Cocoa makes herself vulnerable to Ruby's trickery because she seeks comfort and escape from her adult troubles by allowing herself to revert back to childhood:

Pick a color, she told me. I let her choose, I didn't care, it was so wonderful not having any decisions to make.

Twenty years melted away under her fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair. . . . Tight braids. So tight they pinched my scalp up along the temples and nape. Always tight braids to last for two or three days of school. (246)

Naylor portrays maternal affection as an immediate and effective source of comfort. Cocoa's childlike trust of a woman who is known to harbor jealousy against her emphasizes the profound desire even of adults to take refuge in a mother's care. But Ruby's evil motives remind the reader that motherhood is not idealized and uncomplicated, even in the matriarchal community of Willow Springs. Sitting on a stool between Ruby's thighs, Cocoa symbolically becomes her daughter, while Ruby uses plants and dirt from "the other place" and the Day graveyard to harness the hate that so embittered Cocoa's biological mother and uses it to curse Cocoa.<sup>37</sup> When Miranda realizes what Ruby has done, she enacts her own cleansing ritual, cutting off all of Cocoa's hair in an act of fierce maternal love fighting for her niece/daughter's life. Cocoa's health forces her to revert even further into childhood, as she becomes an almost infantile being cradled and spoon-fed by her grandmother, Abigail, whose softer kind of nurturing complements Miranda's mother-work. Even in extreme pain, Cocoa relishes the love of her mothers and wholly submits herself to their care.

The great and mysterious power that Ruby uses against Cocoa requires Miranda also to access the power of her foremother to overcome the hate that fuels Ruby's magic; this urgent necessity leads Miranda to "the other place" to seek out "the great, grand, Mother." Naylor shows the reader many times that the old plantation house and its garden are a site of mystery connected with Sapphira and infused with generations of Day family history and memory. The journey into the house is as important for Miranda

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<sup>37</sup> Monica Coleman identifies Ruby's braiding of Cocoa's hair as an African ritual representing the Bukongo cosmogram, a symbol of the universe, in the circular patterns of braided hair. The symbol represents the connection between the worlds of the living and dead and can include good as well as evil forces.

as it is for Cocoa. Losing her mother as a girl and acting as the “Little Mama” to her family, Miranda has mothered but has never been mothered. Naylor shows through Miranda’s union with Sapphira that being the object of maternal nurturing is essential to identity. In the attic of the house where both Miranda and her father were born, Miranda finds Bascombe Wade’s ledger; hidden there by Miranda’s father, this written document is her paternal inheritance. She searches the words for meaning and ends the night on her knees, “pray[ing] to the Father and Son as she’d been taught. But she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women” (280). The paternal heritage which exists in the realm of language helps Miranda to access the maternal power of Sapphira, which manifests itself in Miranda’s unconscious dream world. Like Smith’s Gracie and Kidd’s Lily, Miranda returns to the maternal womb to be surrounded by a different kind of knowledge that begins to heal the pain of her memories. Miranda’s dream begins with a series of doors that eventually lead her to “a vast space of glowing light”:

Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. Melting, melting away under the sweet flood waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain’t known existed: Daughter. And she opens the mouth that ain’t there to suckle at the full breasts, deep, greedy swallows of a thickness like cream, seeping from the corners of her lips, spilling onto her chin. Full. Full and warm to rest between the mounds of softness, to feel the beating of a calm and steady heart. (283)

Here Miranda returns to a state of being that is between the unformed, embryonic life held inside the maternal womb and the infant suckling at her mother’s breast. There is

no clear delineation between those states—she exists as both at the same time—because she is in a pre-Oedipal, pre-verbal developmental stage, the *chora*, that precedes awareness of individuality, when all drives are projected onto the maternal body. Coming out of the dream, she knows, because the great, grand Mother Sapphira has shared her knowledge, that she must uncover the well, another image which invokes the maternal womb,<sup>38</sup> where her sister Peace drowned. Looking into the well, Miranda again connects with the pain of her forefathers and is forced to consider for the first time not only her father’s pain at the death of her mother but also the pain of the slave owner, her great-grandfather, Bascombe Wade. She understands that only the reconciliation of the paternal and maternal can bring the “peace” that all of the characters seek and save both Cocoa and George. Naylor reiterates this message when she has Miranda instruct George to enter the other place and the henhouse, two sites of maternal power, with the ledger and John-Paul’s walking cane, two artifacts of paternal love and pain. George cannot believe in the supernatural world of Willow Springs because the islanders don’t have “his kind of words to tell him what’s going on,” and he tries but fails to trust in Miranda’s “mumbo-jumbo” (267, 295). While George can certainly be read as a Christ-figure, Naylor portrays his death as unnecessary.<sup>39</sup> It is not George’s sacrifice that saves Cocoa but Miranda’s—and Sapphira’s—maternal love, a love that could have saved George had he given his hands to Miranda as she asked instead of maintaining the same kind of possessive self-reliance that broke the hearts of John-Paul and Bascombe Wade.

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<sup>38</sup> Hayes notes that in Greek mythology wells were considered umbilical cords which connected the upper world to Mother Earth.

<sup>39</sup> Both Shirley Stave and Adrian L. Ivey read George’s sacrifice as a revision of the crucifixion of Jesus which questions the necessity of human sacrifice.



Even though Cocoa lives, the legacy of pain and loss continues because the characters have not yet united maternal and paternal power. Naylor ends the novel on a note of hope, though, as Cocoa, the mother of boys, has “been given the meaning of peace” and is “ready to go in search for answers” (312). As she frequently visits George’s grave, she no longer resists the voices in the graveyard. She is not afraid to confront and understand her own memories or her spiritual inheritance, when “at last there ain’t no need for words as [Cocoa and Miranda] lock eyes across the distance” (312).

The authors I have analyzed in this chapter all present concepts of divine female power with varied degrees of connection to Christian tradition, from Smith’s integration of maternal qualities into the male God to Kidd’s affirmation and elevation of the mother of Jesus to Naylor’s separate Mother God who exists alongside but independent from the Christian Father God. All of these texts present the sacred feminine as a remedy to the occlusion of the mother-daughter relationship inherent in the patriarchy of traditional Christianity. While I have argued that these authors associate the male God and male church leaders with the Symbolic, upheld by the Word (the Bible), and sacred maternal power with the Semiotic, these novels work not to promote a dualism but to challenge it. While religious discourse is represented as authored and disseminated primarily by men, the female characters in these texts actively participate in the Symbolic order. Female writers author these texts, narrated by female characters—Smith’s Gracie, Kidd’s Lily, and Naylor’s Cocoa—speaking as authoritative subjects able to articulate their own experiences. Through their depictions of re-entering and then emerging from maternal wombs, these authors dramatize an access to the semiotic *chora*, which Kristeva

identifies as capable of transgressing the Symbolic order. These returns to the womb (which also allude to the Christian experience of being “born again”) are critical, climactic moments in which daughters reunite with lost mothers, receiving spiritual nourishment and experiencing the sacred feminine. They are then able to engage the Word with a fuller concept of divinity that transgresses and transcends the abusive and oppressive structures that the female characters have associated with human men.

CHAPTER IV  
MOVING INTO THE WORLD:  
FROM PAIN TO CREATION

Some of the most visible political movements associated with Christians in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are tied directly to sexual morality, namely movements against abortion and gay marriage and in support of abstinence-only sex education. While the religious stance against abortion foregrounds the belief that human life begins at the moment of conception, the rhetoric of abortion as an issue of “convenience” characterizes the impregnated woman as reckless and immoral, not willing to take responsibility for the natural consequences of her (presumably extra-marital) sexual acts. Rejecting sex education programs that emphasize protected intercourse, the extremely popular teen abstinence programs, like the Southern Baptist True Love Waits campaign which quickly expanded beyond its denominational beginning and has been active for almost twenty years, posit sexual abstinence not in terms of prevention of disease or pregnancy but as a sacred commitment to God and to one’s future spouse and children to live a sexually moral life. Remaining “persistently pure in thought, look, and touch” ensures that one will be “emotionally and spiritually vibrant and alive” (“True Love Waits”).<sup>40</sup> Interpreting same-sex marriage as an endorsement of sexual acts that are forbidden under Christian law, opponents of same-sex marriage cite heterosexual marriage as a sacred covenant that would be tarnished if

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted from a “diagram outlining the True Love Waits strategy” available for download from LifeWay Christian Resources at <http://www.lifeway.com/tlw/>

homosexual couples were allowed to marry. While most mainstream Christian denominations acknowledge marital sex as a means of expressing love and sharing intimacy between husband and wife, not exclusively for the purpose of conceiving children as some more extreme doctrines hold, beliefs about sexual activity outside the specific context of heterosexual marriage are concerned not with relationships but with the morality of individual acts.<sup>41</sup> While privately many Christians certainly engage in sexual acts outside of marriage, the public stance against all such acts is so strong as to move millions of people to push for legislation in support of their religious beliefs about sexual morality, from promoting those beliefs through education programs to criminalizing the sex acts themselves.

Such public movements establish a strong association between Christianity and the proscription of sexual activity, which seems to preclude the possibility of a sexual experience that is also a religious experience. The authors I analyze in this chapter, however, create just such images—sexual acts infused with religious meaning, both positive and negative—that work to disrupt the reader’s expectations of both sex and religion. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Sheri Reynolds’ *The Rapture of Canaan* center on sexual relationships that are surprising in the religious significance attributed to them by the characters. These relationships are depicted as transformative, inciting necessary change in the characters involved in the relationships as well as in those around them. Walker and Reynolds subvert the religious moral paradigm by presenting

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<sup>41</sup> The Roman Catholic proscription of birth control does seem to indicate a perception of sexual intercourse as primarily for the conception of children, but the church’s advocacy of “natural family planning,” including church-sponsored resources that teach women how to monitor their fertility, acknowledges that married couples may have sex while deliberately trying to prevent pregnancy.

bodily pleasure as a spiritually enriching alternative to the traditional Christian valorization of restraint, sacrifice, and most dramatically, bodily pain.

Historically, sexual imagery has been employed in religious discourse, used by monks, nuns, and poets to describe their relationships with the divine as intensely intimate and pleasurable, as that of lover and beloved.<sup>42</sup> As part of a larger argument that the Bible actually affirms eros, contrary to the way it has been used to define body and spirit as distinct and separate, biblical scholar David MacLain Carr notes that the biblical book Song of Solomon was once one of the most widely used scriptures, understood as poems of “love between God and God’s people,” until the 1800s when scholars began to characterize the text as “evok[ing] the love between a woman and a man.” Still a part of the Bible, the Song of Solomon was then considered minor because it was “‘merely’ sexual” (4). Christian sexual imagery is dwarfed by its dominant ideology, which holds sexuality and the human body in general as inferior to spirituality. Immediate and fleeting sensations, many believe, impede the human experience of the divine and eternal. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the religious emphasis on the eternal, at its head “the exclusively male God who creates out of nothing, transcending nature and dominating history,” has led to the development of a “world-destroying spirituality that projects upon the female of the race all its abhorrence,

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<sup>42</sup> Erotic imagery is common in the literature of Christian mystics, including Teresa of Àvila, Julian of Norwich, and John of the Cross. In her autobiography, Teresa describes Jesus appearing to her in bodily form and one event in which a cherub repeatedly pierced her body with a spear, causing both intense pain and pleasure. Bernini’s famous sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* displayed in the basilica Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome recreates this moment. Scholars often interpret St. Teresa’s account and Bernini’s representation of the encounter as erotic. Artistic depictions of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian also feature a figure, usually semi-nude, pierced by arrows with an expression of ecstasy on his face, and Sebastian’s name and image has been appropriated by visual and literary artists, including Tennessee Williams and filmmaker Derek Jarman, to represent homosexual eros.

hostility, and fear of the bodily powers from which it has arisen and from which it wishes to be independent” (50). Ruether further contends that this belief system has been used to justify the oppression of groups of people as well as ecological destruction, as the denial of this world in favor of an other-worldly reality minimizes the responsibilities of people to each other and to the earth. Because women have been, in this construction, associated with nature and body as opposed to culture and spirit, “Women must be the spokespersons for a new humanity arising out of the reconciliation of spirit and body” (51). Margaret R. Miles identifies evidence of this belief system and its gendered implications in the art and literature of Western Christianity, which, she argues, “present the heroic saga of the development of male subjectivity” and in doing so employ representations of female nakedness “as a cipher for sin, sex, and death” and “preclude a parallel representation of women’s subjectivity” (12). Just as Ruether calls on women to combat this system by challenging the dualism of spirit and body, Miles asserts that public representations of women’s bodies by women artists are necessary to developing a “female collective voice” that incorporates the diversity and particularity necessary to express female subjectivity (171).

These scholars, among many others, locate the Christian devaluing of sexuality in the dualism of soul and body that is replicated in the masculine/feminine dualism that places greater worth on the former at the expense of the latter. Their solutions include both transvaluing the undervalued elements, placing greater significance on the body, and challenging the dualistic structures themselves, demonstrating that the body has great bearing on the soul, or spirit, and that spiritual and religious meaning can be

manifested in human sentience and sensuality. Christian dogma, of course, includes many examples of religious truth, even the existence of God, affirmed and substantiated in human bodies: the creation of man and then woman from man's rib (Gen. 1:26-27, Gen. 2: 21-23); the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:7); the miracles of healing (Matt. 8:2-3, Luke 18:35-43, and others); the death and resurrection of Jesus, whose identity is then confirmed when the apostle Thomas places his hands inside the wounds (John 20:24-29); and the bodily resurrection of all believers in the end times (1 Cor. 15:12-13). The cross, Christianity's core symbol, evokes sustained bodily pain, the crucified God; scripturally, the sacrifice of the human body of God is required for the salvation of humankind. As I have suggested in previous chapters, one project of both fiction writers and theologians has been to minimize the ideology of sacrifice and to emphasize creative love. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry develops a theory of the experience of pain and its ability to destroy all of the contents of human consciousness. If at one end of the spectrum lies the body in extreme pain, robbed of its ability to conceive of anything beyond its own sensations, at the other end lies imagination and creation, which has the power to alleviate pain by extending it outside of the body and into the social realm. Both Walker and Reynolds begin their novels with images of human bodies in isolating pain, which destroys subjectivity, and later introduce an antithesis to that pain in the deeply personal but shareable experience of sexual pleasure, accompanied by artistic creation that extends the healing sensuality into artifacts shared with others outside of the sexual relationship.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker establishes Christianity as one of many interconnected oppressive institutions, tied directly to the abuse that the protagonist Celie suffers at the hands of men. From the first words of the novel, Walker connects an act of violent sexual abuse directly to the concept of God: “*You better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (11). The italicized section, which the text implies is spoken to Celie by her stepfather<sup>43</sup> after he rapes her for the first time, sets up the epistolary form of the novel, comprised mostly of Celie’s letters to God. Her stepfather’s command at once proscribes speech and suggests a confidant to whom she might turn. By raping Celie, he denies her authority over her own body and refuses to hear her objections to his assault. She cannot express in words the pain she experiences as she is being raped, and when she reacts with a cry, a non-verbal vocalization of the pain in her body, her stepfather tries to silence even this, choking her and “saying You better shut up and git used to it” (11). Scarry describes one of the essential aspects of physical pain as “its ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated.” “Before destroying language,” Scarry writes, “[pain] first monopolizes language, becomes its only subject” until “eventually the pain so deepens that the coherence of complaint is displaced by the sounds anterior to learned language” (54). Walker introduces Celie at the most traumatic moment of her life, when she needs desperately to reclaim the speech that she has lost in that moment of extreme pain.

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<sup>43</sup> At the time of the rape, Celie believes that this man is her biological father, which intensifies the trauma of the event. She later learns that her father was lynched when she was a baby and her mother remarried.



The specific forbidding of speech that accompanies Celie's pain renders her unable to talk about her abuse, so she chooses to write it, as her sister Nettie recalls in a letter to Celie years later: "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (112). Walker's use of the epistolary form, and specifically the form of written prayers, suggests that Celie tries to cope with rape and abuse by putting her experience into written words, a task further complicated by her lack of education. Celie's pregnancies and childbirths not only cause her physical pain, including the pain of engorged breasts when her stepfather takes her babies from her, but they also prevent her from attending school. Employing irregular spelling and grammar, Walker demonstrates Celie's limited literacy, which makes her effort to write about her life an especially difficult task. Celie's frustration at her lack of education is a direct consequence of her stepfather's dominance and abuse. When her schoolteacher comes to ask that Celie return to school, she gives up and leaves upon seeing Celie's pregnant belly. When Celie tries to study at home, with Nettie's help, she becomes discouraged because she cannot concentrate on books while her mind is full of her fears of her father and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, the man who will be her husband. Celie's struggle to write to God is shown early in the novel to be a constant fight to endure and survive, made necessary but almost impossible by her father's and then her husband's efforts to dominate her body and her mind.

While God is Celie's confidant, she cannot separate her understanding of him from her experience with her father. When Celie's mother asks her about the father of

her baby, she tells her that it is God's because she doesn't "know no other man or what else to say." Later when the baby disappears she tells her mother, "God took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can" (12). In her next letter, Celie writes that her father has taken her second child and sold him to a couple in town. These two letters, both addressed to God, exemplify Celie's conflicted relationship with God, who is both her savior and her tormentor. Her insistence on prayer as a reaction to grief implies that she believes, or at least hopes, that God is real and that He hears her prayers. Walker emphasizes this belief when she ends one letter with Celie's promise to protect her sister from their stepfather "With God help" (13). Her prayers are marked by a profound dissonance, however, when she attributes her stepfather's despicable actions to God himself. While Celie does not yet articulate a distrust or fear of God, Walker binds Celie's feelings about her raping and, Celie fears, murdering stepfather to her concept of God. These conflicting statements are not the secret and shameful thoughts that she can only write and never speak. Both her accusation that God has impregnated her and then killed her child and her promise that God will help her protect Nettie are spoken aloud and then recorded by Celie in her letters. While Celie has drawn a distinction between what she can say and what she can write, these opposing beliefs are so powerful that they infiltrate both realms of expression.

Celie understands her value to men as well as to God in terms of her body. Her stepfather exploits Celie when her mother is too sick to work in the house or to have sex with him, forcing Celie to perform overwhelming domestic labor and using her as a

sexual object. When he wants Celie out of his home, he lists her physical attributes to her potential husband in a scene that, with the bitter irony of being carried out by African American men, mimics a slave auction: “She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her.”<sup>44</sup> You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (18). As Celie stands before the two men and turns around to be evaluated, they determine her value based on the labor she can perform as well as her reproductive potential. Walker repeatedly connects Celie’s life with her stepfather to her life with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, making clear that she is atrociously mistreated in both houses. In both houses, Celie is inundated with domestic work, and the beneficiaries of her labor are cruel and ungrateful. In her stepfather’s house, Celie cannot keep up with the work of caring for her siblings and her dying mother—“By the time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By the time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By the time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time” (12)—and in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s house, the children insult her and throw rocks at her. Like her stepfather, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats Celie, and he has no concern for her sexual pleasure, “just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (79). Describing critiques that approach the novel strictly from the standpoints of gender or race as incomplete, Charmaine Eddy analyzes the enigmatic interplay of cultural narratives that inscribe the bodies in *The Color Purple*. As the scenes that depict Celie’s slave-like life exemplify, attending only to “the cultural texts of sexuality and domesticity” can mask “the acts of

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<sup>44</sup> This statement is another example of the connection between Celie’s father and God. He tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that God has rendered Celie infertile when the cause, Walker implies, is actually the sexual abuse that he has inflicted on her.

violence which racialise the body” (105). A third narrative that demands attention in analysis of this text is that of Christianity, which interacts with the discourses of race, gender, and sexuality that Eddy addresses to inscribe meaning on Celie’s body.

Learning to survive by giving up her body to serve men, Celie also believes that God requires the work of her body. Her religious labor is similar to the work she does for her husband: “I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there’s wood for the stove in wintertime. He call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie, he say, You faithful as the day is long” (48). Just as her father affirms her worth by describing the work she can perform, the preacher affirms her faith by acknowledging her work. While the preacher’s compliment might appear a positive act of support and appreciation, Walker undermines this interpretation by explaining in the previous paragraph that the church members have seen not only Celie’s struggles with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s children but also Celie’s two pregnancies as a young teenager, refusing all along to act as advocates for Celie or even as sympathetic friends. In this passage, Walker establishes the church as one more institution of oppression, along with marriage and slavery.

Celie copes with her life of abuse by dissociating herself from her body. “I make myself wood,” she writes. “I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear men” (30). In her efforts to endure physical pain, she also distances herself from emotional sensations. After years of marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, when Celie’s daughter-in-law Sofia asks her what she does when she gets mad, she answers that she “can’t remember the last time [she] felt mad” (47). Again connecting her husband to her

father and then to God, she tells Sofia, “Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all” (47). Walker shows that the abuse that Celie has suffered forces her to experience both her body and her emotions as antagonistic to her. They are sites of pain and exploitation that she must endure, with no potential for pleasure or joy. Furthermore, God is directly implicated in this pain, as it is God’s commandment that she submit to her father and husband. Celie’s task is to endure her pain in the hope of being rewarded in heaven after death: “This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (47). Walker portrays Celie as supplanting her potential for pleasure on earth with her beliefs about the afterlife and the requirements for being welcomed there. Rather than defending herself, as Sofia does and encourages Celie to do, Celie relies on her learned behavior to please her husband and God, denying her own desires and suffering constant psychological and physical torment.

Walker presents a reductionist concept of Christianity and God. At one point in the novel, Celie describes God as “big and old and tall and graybearded and white” with “bluish-gray” eyes and “white lashes” (176). In Walker’s construction of Christianity, devotion to a distant God renders life on earth meaningless, and belief in a white, male God not only empowers the gendered and racialized patriarchal structure among humans but also “represents the possibility of transcendent violence directed against African Americans as a whole and African American women in particular” (Powers 71). This depiction of Christian beliefs conflicts with the actual doctrines of many Christian

denominations that emphasize each believer's personal relationship with God and appeal to Christian ethics in politicized movements that advocate for oppressed people.

Walker's simplification, however, is not an oversight but a response to the material conditions of black women in the pre-Civil Rights South, the book's setting, and in the 1980s when Walker wrote the book. Many Southern churches were silent on issues of Civil Rights while others actually supported and enabled racism. Despite the increasing promotion of liberation theology in the African American Christian community, many black churches understood God to be white, an image Walker evokes in the novel through Celie's sister Nettie, who accepts the biblical text but blames the illustrations added to it for convincing them all that the people in the Bible were white (Walker 125).<sup>45</sup> Black and white churches alike, as I have described, continue to exclude women from certain aspects of religious life, especially leadership and preaching. A self-labeled "womanist," Walker argues in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* that feminist and African American political movements neglect the concerns of black women, whose identities are inscribed with the inseparable cultural narratives of both gender and race. Presenting characters who are victims of a complex system of racism and sexism and locating the white male God firmly within those systems, as both cause and symptom, Walker presents concrete conditions that produce a character who

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<sup>45</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom describes a persistence of evangelical Christianity similar to that of white denominations among African American churches in the first half of the twentieth century. He cites the Civil Rights Movement as a turning point for African American churches, when liberation theology, which emphasizes social justice, became intimately tied to anti-racist activism. James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, first published in 1970 and then revised and republished in 1990, locates the basis of racism in a white concept of God, accepted by white and black Christians alike. Cone asserts that the central project of Christianity in the twentieth century should be to emancipate African Americans from white oppression. In his introduction to the later publication of this book, Cone acknowledges his early sexism and neglect of the role of African American women in the struggle for liberation.

passively submits to abuse while clinging to the notion of heavenly reward. Celie's lived experience substantiates her reductive understanding of the divine.

The religion to which Celie is devoted in the beginning of the novel is borne out on her body through the infliction of pain and the destruction of her voice, through rapes, beatings, and forced labor. Her liberation is achieved, then, through the reclaiming of her body and voice, a process also steeped in spirituality. Walker juxtaposes the silenced and submissive Celie with the blues singer Shug Avery, a character who takes great delight in her own body and voice. Shug unapologetically defies the conventions of the community by having sexual affairs with several men, including an ongoing affair with Celie's husband. When she falls ill, the church members gossip about her, concluding that she must have the "nasty women disease," and the preacher takes "her condition for his text," calling her "slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner" (48-49). Celie's response to Shug is quite different. From the first time she sees a photograph of Shug Avery, she dreams of meeting her in person. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ brings Shug to stay at their home, Celie wishes she could change her clothes and style her hair to impress Shug. Even when Shug greets her with insults and ingratitude, Celie is happy to nurse Shug through her illness. While Shug first appears as if she will mistreat Celie just as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does, Walker makes clear that Celie's relationship with Shug is different because Shug is a woman.

Celie states clearly and repeats throughout the novel, "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (15). The two men who have been prominent in Celie's life—her stepfather and her husband—traumatize

her to the point that she universalizes their cruelty and attributes it to all men. While men “look pretty much alike” to her, she sees in Shug a woman who embodies what Celie believes she cannot be (23). Marveling at Shug’s sharp words and determination to recover from her illness, Celie remarks that Shug is “evil” and “that keep her alive” (51). Contrasting the way that the church women characterize Shug, Celie pronounces her evil with the utmost admiration, denoting Shug’s refusal to conform with anyone’s expectations or to be dominated by anyone, man or woman. Celie states that her own strategy for survival is submission: “I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (29). After meeting Shug, however, Celie recognizes that it is rebellion that keeps Shug alive. The word “evil” also reminds us that Shug’s behavior does not characterize her as a good wife, good mother, or good Christian. She has, in fact, been excluded from all of those categories. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s family forbids him to marry Shug, because she has a bad reputation, even after she bears his children. Shug implies that her children live with their grandmother because Shug’s mother doesn’t believe Shug can be a good mother. The preacher and other church members make clear that she is not welcome in the church, holding her up as an example of sin. Calling Shug “evil,” Celie acknowledges that there is no model in her limited sphere to characterize her as an admirable person. Celie, then, inverts the definition of “evil,” transforming it from sin to virtue.

Walker’s redefinition of evil challenges traditional Christian morality. The quality that Celie admires in Shug is what Mary Daly calls “the Courage to Sin” (*Pure Lust* 151). Because denying the externally-imposed restrictions of institutions of oppression is considered evil by those institutions, it is labeled “sin,” but to sin in this



way Daly argues, “is to be intellectual in the most direct and daring way, claiming and trusting the deep correspondence between the structures/processes of one’s own mind and the structures/processes of reality” (152). Challenging the constructions that dominate one’s perception of reality is the first step in striving to apprehend through one’s own intuition and reason a reality unconstrained by cultural determinism. This concept assumes an inherent selfhood capable of being freed from culture. As a structure that orders interpretation of experience, language is one construction open for such challenge. Daly takes as one of her core principles a redefinition of “the traditional Deadly Sin of lust”:

On one side, it Names the deadly dispassion that prevails in patriarchy—the life-hating lechery that rapes and kills the objects of its obsession/aggression. Indeed, the usual meaning of *lust* within the Lecherous State of patriarchy is well known. It means “sexual desire, especially of a violent self-indulgent character: LECHERY, LASCIVIOUSNESS.” Phallic lust, violent and self indulgent, levels all life, dismembering spirit/matter, attempting annihilation. . . . The word *Lust* has utterly Other meanings than this, however. It means “VIGOR, FERTILITY” . . . It means “an intense longing: CRAVING.” It means “EAGERNESS, ENTHUSIASM.” . . . Primarily, then, *Pure Lust* Names the high humor, hope, and cosmic accord/harmony of those women who choose to escape, to follow our hearts’ deepest desire and bound out of

the State of Bondage. . . It is pure Passion: unadulterated, absolute, simple sheer striving for abundance of be-ing. (2-3)

The church members' characterization of Shug as lusty and sinful carries, for Celie, all of the positive meanings of sin and lust that Daly outlines. Celie's willingness to redefine conventions for Shug opens her, also, to redefining her understanding of her own body, starting with her capacity for pleasure.

Marking most of the heterosexual relationships in the novel as oppressive and abusive, Walker presents Shug as a vehicle by which to reclaim the female body as a woman's own source of power and pleasure. Shug's illness provides an opportunity for Celie to see her naked body because she is too weak to bathe herself. When Celie sees her, she is shocked by her beauty and responds with erotic desire: "First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (83). Always understanding herself as object of a male gaze, never as the seeing and desiring subject, Celie interprets her attraction to Shug as a masculine act. Celie's gaining of subjectivity, however, does not deny subjectivity to Shug. She neither passively accepts the object position nor recoils and hides herself. Instead, she speaks up, possessing body and voice at the same time, and snaps at Celie, "You never seen a naked woman before?" Because Celie rejects her own body, so often used as a weapon against her, she has not looked at herself naked, and she feels as if looking at Shug is the first time she has seen a naked woman. Shug poses for Celie and tells her to "take a good look" (53). Removed from the threat that heterosexual sex has represented for her, Celie experiences for the first time sexual desire and full recognition

of a female body. Celie characterizes this moment as a spiritual experience when she writes, “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying” (53). This connection between prayer and erotic experience marks an important change in Celie’s previous understanding of the divine. Walker has established Celie’s letters to God as a means of coping with sexual abuse that negates pleasure and desire and has set Shug in opposition to the religion in which Celie participates. But where the church-sanctioned sex between husband and wife moves Celie to imagine that she is somewhere else, away from her own body, the body of this woman defined by the church as sexually transgressive moves Celie to recognize and acknowledge the sensations of her body.<sup>46</sup> When Celie “prays” by touching Shug’s body, she begins the process of redefining her understanding of her own body and her concept of God.

Walker underscores Shug’s role in Celie’s redefinition of her body as a site of pleasure when she has Shug teach Celie about her genitals. In conversation about their sex lives, Shug learns that Celie has never experienced orgasm, and she pronounces Celie “still a virgin” (79). Shug refuses to define sexual intercourse strictly in terms of penetration, instead defining it by the pleasure that both partners feel. Because Celie has never enjoyed sex, she has never had what Shug defines as a legitimate sexual

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<sup>46</sup> While the church members criticize Shug for being promiscuous, they never comment on homosexuality as sinful. Indeed, none of the characters define Celie and Shug as lesbians or characterize their sexual relationship as aberrant or immoral. The nature of their relationship is never controversial within the text of the novel, even though Walker implies that several characters know that the two women are lovers. Barbara Smith addresses this strategy, suggesting that “it may be Walker’s conscious decision to deal with readers’ potentially negative reactions by using the disarming strategy of writing as if women falling in love with each other were quite ordinary, an average occurrence which does not even need to be specifically remarked” (797). Even so, Smith questions the characters’ authenticity as Lesbians, noting that “their lack of self-consciousness as Lesbians, the lack of scrutiny their relationship receives from the outside world, and their isolation from other Lesbians make *The Color Purple’s* categorization as a Lesbian novel problematic” (800).

experience. Not only does Shug explain to Celie that sex should be pleasurable, but she also attempts to teach Celie how to achieve orgasm:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work. (79)

While Shug describes her heterosexual experiences, she does not explicitly mention penetration, instead focusing on female orgasm and stimulation of external genitalia. Luce Irigaray describes female sexuality in similar terms, emphasizing the broad “geography of her pleasure” and the autoerotic quality of her genitals “formed of two lips in continuous contact” (28, 24). Attention to the specificity of female sex organs and the potential for pleasure contained within the female body, without need of a male partner, is necessary “if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations” (24). Shug’s conversation turns more overtly to instruction when she gives Celie a mirror and tells her to look at her genitals. Celie’s response is a combination of revulsion (“Ugh. All that hair.”) and admiration (“look like a wet rose”) (79). While she is reluctant to label it “pretty” as Shug does, her answer is even more profound: “It mine” (80). With these two words, Walker advances the process of reclaiming the female body that starts with Celie’s admiration of Shug and ends with her assertion of possession over her own genitals, the site of her past trauma. While abuse has defined Celie’s body as a site of pain and an object of manipulation, this redefinition

of sex opens the possibility of bodily pleasure that Celie had defensively closed off. Shug's explicit reference to the clitoris, making sure that Celie finds the exact spot, "the right button to mash," also ensures Celie the ability to access that pleasure herself, not depending on anyone else for the gratification her body can offer her (79). Celie's life does not magically change in this moment, but she does begin to make efforts toward reconnecting with her body through masturbation and even through sex with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, no longer pretending that she is not there.

The transformation of Celie's body from a site of pain to a site of pleasure helps her to recover her voice. Throughout the novel, Walker draws strong connections between body and voice. Celie's voice is silenced when her body is traumatized. Shug displays her body sensually, through her movements and her costumes, while she sings in jazz clubs. Sophia, who speaks up for herself when her husband tries to dominate her, is described as a large "Amazon" woman who is willing and able to physically defend herself when necessary. When Sophia "sassess" the mayor's wife, she is physically punished for her words, first beaten and then forced by law to work as a maid for the mayor's family. Over and over, body and voice are symbolically bound. Walker makes this connection the strongest when Celie finally speaks aloud about her rape by her stepfather. After developing a friendship with Shug that includes close physical contact, hugging and sometimes sharing a bed, Celie tells Shug how both of her children were conceived. The talking and crying lead to a scene of love-making between the two women that begins an on-going sexual affair. Celie's silence had been based on fear and shame, but her gradual redefinition of her body and of sex helps her to understand that

the rape is not her crime and should not be her shame. While she speaks, Celie's body is constantly touching Shug's body, as Shug embraces her to comfort her. Her willingness to speak indicates a sense of security she feels being touched by another person, and the sexual act that follows her story marks the replacement of terror with love. The most horrible event in Celie's life is a sexual encounter, but with Shug's help she learns to reject that definition of sex and replace it with the definition of sex as an expression of caring, for oneself or for another person. Celie feels freer to use her voice as she feels more awareness and ownership of her body. While Celie still writes to God—this scene, in fact, is told in one of those letters—she has added a confidant to whom she can confess what was previously reserved for “*nobody but God*” (11). The letter's salutation, “Dear God,” shows Celie's continued belief in God and need to write her prayers, but the words finally spoken to Shug foreshadow Celie's angry rejection of God as her confidant as well as Shug's role in Celie's new relationship with the divine.

After learning that her sister Nettie has been writing to her for years, that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has hidden all of her letters, and that the man who raped her was not her biological father but actually her stepfather, Celie abruptly stops writing to God. She is angry with God, who “act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (175). Celie's impulse is to entirely reject God, but despite her anger, she finds it extremely difficult to turn her back on her lifelong beliefs: “It ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain” (176). In a letter addressed to Nettie, Celie recounts a long conversation with Shug about God. Walker articulates through Shug's words a clear theological stance on the

identity of God and the interaction of God and humans and characterizes these beliefs as developing out of the necessity of women, more specifically of black women, to believe in divine power separate from the structures of oppression endorsed and enabled by religion. As I have argued, Walker establishes the church as an institution of oppression when she describes Celie's understanding of her relationship with God as one of master and servant. She believes that to please God she must perform tasks similar to those expected of her by her stepfather and husband. Walker reiterates this belief when Celie reacts with surprise at Shug's claim that she loves and pleases God: "You telling me God love you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?" (176). In response, Shug explains her own beliefs to Celie, beliefs gained not through the church—"Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me," she tells her—but through her own meditation on her body, nature, and the world. Shug's approach to the divine emphasizes immanence over transcendence. While evangelical Christianity teaches that each believer has a personal relationship with God, Shug suggests that the power structures in that system distances the believer from God. Shug's approach to the divine intensifies the search for personal interaction with God and also makes that interaction more accessible through the belief that God is in all things and all people, neither confined to a church nor far away in heaven. Walker lays out not just a system of beliefs but a process of seeking and learning, described as a gradual coming-to-consciousness that she has begun to dramatize in Celie's life. Shug tells Celie that the first step in developing her understanding of God is the realization that the "old white man" was created by white

men, radically denying the claim that “God wrote the bible” (177). Reducing God to a linguistic construction, Shug then has the power to rewrite God, and she describes her version to Celie as “the thing I believe” (177). To Shug, “God ain’t a he or a she, but a It” and It “is inside you and inside everybody else,” in “trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people” (177, 178).

After connecting Celie’s former concept of God to her understanding of men and to the manipulation of her body, Walker presents a new definition of God based on the new understanding of her body that Celie has gained through her relationship with Shug. Comparing communion with God to sex, Shug tells Celie that “God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ‘em you enjoys ‘em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that’s going on, and praise God by liking what you like” (178). Shug’s God makes no requirements of people. When It is “pissed off” because people fail to recognize beauty in the world, It does not exact revenge but instead makes another beautiful thing to get their attention (178).

Walker emphasizes that the change from He to It is not easy or quick. Although Celie feels her “eyes opening,” accepting this new God is “hard work” fraught with lasting anger at the old God who allowed terrible events to occur in Celie’s life (179). This revision of God is not, Walker seems to suggest, as difficult as abandoning the concept of God altogether. Christianity has been Celie’s primary interpretive framework, telling her who she is, how she should behave, and what her place is in the world. Walker recognizes the power of the belief in God, not only for her fictional



characters but also for the African American community that is her subject and her body of readers. James Coleman argues that critics who ignore the concept of God, focusing instead on the novel's "liberating political ideology," neglect the author's relationship to "the specific theological tradition of African American culture outside the academy" and that tradition's place in political work:

The novel and its author have an investment in the culture, although it may be a conflicted one, and the culture holds to the sacred tradition of God and the Bible, even given all of the contradictions of action in secular life. Black people tend to make the sacred a part of individual and community social and political struggle where they can effectively do so, and to separate the sacred and secular to retain both where they cannot, but generally the tradition of belief in God remains essential to the lives of African Americans, including their social and political action. (130, 131)

At the same time that Walker criticizes the church in the novel for its embracing of patriarchy and neglect of the pain of individuals, she presents a variety of responses to that way of practicing religion that do not always necessitate abandonment of Christianity. Even as Shug urges Celie toward a radical redefinition of God, she tries to "budge [her] away from blasphemy" when Celie expresses her anger against God. Sofia resists male domination throughout the novel and defies church tradition by serving as a pallbearer at her mother's funeral, a role usually forbidden to women. But she also

believes that her mother will go to heaven and reacts with shock when Celie talks about making love to God.

The most powerful example of transforming religion while maintaining tradition is Nettie. When Walker has Celie stop writing letters to God, she introduces Nettie's letters from her mission field in Africa, maintaining the presence of the traditional Christian God all along. Coleman rightly points out that the novel's "happy ending obfuscates any potential conflicts that would follow the reunion" because Walker never shows how the character Nettie, who not only remains committed to Christianity but also to mission work and church building in Africa and back in the United States, might oppose Celie's new spirituality or her sexuality (129).<sup>47</sup> More important to the theological implications of the novel, however, are the similarities between the new religious consciousnesses that both Nettie and Celie have developed. Both characters begin developing their personal religious philosophies when they understand their previously accepted image of God as a constructed artifact, an epiphany that strikes Nettie when she learns that white people lived in Europe at the time of biblical events, far from the setting of the scriptural stories. It is only the illustrations added by white people that have created their images of a white God. At an African ritual honoring the roofleaf, a plant crucial to the Olinka people, the missionaries' interpreter explains to Nettie, "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" When she is "face to face with the Olinka God" all of it makes "perfect sense" to

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<sup>47</sup> Walker's omission of this conflict is even more pronounced now, after African American churches in large numbers publicly supported the 2008 amendment to the California state constitution to deny same-sex marriage.

her (142-43). Nettie even acknowledges sexual pleasure as a spiritual experience. When she and her mission partner Samuel confess their love for each other, she is “transported by ecstasy in [his] arms.” Although she worries that Celie might be shocked by her “forward behavior,” Nettie does not characterize their premarital sex as sinful. She “love[s] him bodily, *as a man!*” and she also loves “the vulnerability and beauty of his soul” (211). The central transformative features of Nettie’s theology are the same as Celie’s. They interpret sex as both a physical and spiritual experience and recognize the presence of God in nature, as in the roofleaf and the color purple in a field. Most importantly, they both recognize that the oppression that has been carried out in the name of God progresses directly from the objectification of God as white man. Nettie writes to Celie that “not being tied to what God looks like frees us.” Her goal when they return to America is to “found a new church in [their] community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person’s spirit is encouraged to seek God directly” (227). This highly personal connection to God carries with it a profound obligation to community.

Walker portrays Nettie’s religion as always social, accompanied by humanitarian work for the African people and a strong desire to help others establish their own understandings of God. Through artistic creation, Walker makes Celie’s private spirituality public, as well. Opposing Celie’s first God who “threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes,” she presents Shug’s God who is only responsible for creating new life and new joys. Walker parallels this transition with Celie’s transition into the life of an artist. Just as Shug is revealed to be a powerfully spiritual person, much more so than

the church women who snub her, she is also portrayed as an artist who writes and performs songs as a way of bringing joy to herself and to the people she loves. In the first few days of knowing Celie, Shug acknowledges the connection between them by connecting Celie to her creative process. As Celie combs Shug's hair, Shug hums a tune and attributes it to Celie, who "scratched it out" of her head (75). While Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and his son Harpo have exploited Celie's labor without gratitude, Shug redefines care-work as a creative act, with a new song to show for it. In a performance at Harpo's jazz club, Shug sings "Miss Celie's song" and announces to the audience that Celie is responsible for it. Celie is proud and appreciative because it is the "first time somebody made something up and name it after me" (75). Later, when Celie learns that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has hidden Nettie's letters, Celie begins to obsess about murdering him. Shug suggests that Celie make pants for herself, to put "a needle and not a razor" in her hand (137). Redirecting anger into productive—but not coerced—work, Walker presents creation as a remedy for destruction.

In drawing connections between pain and imagining, Scarry observes "that there is one piece of language used—in many different languages—at once as a near synonym for pain, *and* a near synonym for created object; and that is the word 'work.' . . . The more it realizes and transforms itself in its object, the closer it is to the imagination, to art, to culture; the more it is unable to bring forth an object or, bringing it forth, is then cut off from its object, the more it approaches the condition of pain" (169). As part of the abuse she suffers, the work of Celie's body, her domestic labor, has been taken from her without appreciation or compensation. More importantly, the creation of her body,

the two children she bore as a young girl, is stolen from her. While Celie does not consent to the sex acts that lead to their conception, Walker makes clear that Celie loves and wants her babies, embroidering diapers for them and dreaming of what they might look like as the years pass. Her engorged breasts dripping milk with no baby to feed connects the pain in her body to the emotional trauma of being a bereft mother, made worse by having to care for someone else's children after her involuntary marriage. By engaging in an act of creation, making pants intended for her own use and enjoyment, Celie claims the work of her body as her own. Turning her thoughts towards making rather than killing also helps her to gain strength and to heal emotionally from Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s cruelty. Walker emphasizes that sewing the pants is an imaginative project for Celie, different from any sewing she might have done as part of her chores as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s wife. She "dream[s] and dream[s] and dream[s] over" the colors, fabrics, and cut of the pants, matching the garments to the needs and personalities of the recipients (192).

As the process of imagining and designing changes Celie's invisible mental activities, the artifacts that she produces and shares make the intensely private visible and, therefore, shareable. Through this "movement out into the world" Celie's imagination, in the form of her pants, becomes tangible to everyone who sees and wears them (Scarry 170). This move is necessary for Celie and the other characters in the novel. "Changed consciousness," Powers argues, "is only an opiate when it is imagined as a sufficient condition rather than as a precondition for material change" (86). When Celie finally tells Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that she is leaving him to "enter into the Creation," her

words encompass her creative sewing, her lovemaking with Shug, and her developing concept of the divine interconnectedness of the world. Celie's pants become a means for her to support herself financially and "transmit to [the characters] who wear them the womanist quality of self-determination and independence" (Fraile-Marcos 126). Celie's transformation, once shared, changes all of those around her, even turning Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ into a repented abuser and sensitive friend. By the end of the novel, when Celie is reunited with her sister and her children, she has triumphed over extreme pain and can call out her gratitude to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (249). Diane Gabrielsen Scholl labels *The Color Purple* a "radically Christian" novel, informed by the conspicuous, improbable, and ironic reversals of conditions characteristic of biblical parables. Scholl further interprets the unrealistically ideal ending as "a figurative depiction of ultimate redemption" (262). It is unlikely that Walker imagines this final scene as specifically Christian redemption. Walker dedicates this book "to the Spirit," referring not to the Holy Spirit as traditionally understood in Christianity, but to the natural connections to which people can appeal on behalf of justice and love, the "Everything" with which Celie rejoices. The somewhat magical union in the end does in many ways transcend history, for the moment forgetting the troubles that her characters still face in a racist world. The power that Walker portrays in this scene is not one of supernatural salvation but of the ability of humans on this earth to transform themselves and their communities—even the world, as Nettie's journey to Africa indicates—through the recognition of shared humanity and the healing potential of answering destruction with creation. Religion itself is a potential

object for creative appropriation and revision, and as Shug's divine "It" demonstrates and Celie's final prayer affirms, the concept of God removed from the oppressive power structures that enable racism and sexism can be a vehicle for accessing the spiritual connections among humans and the natural world.

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Sheri Reynolds also demonstrates the need to challenge destructive institutions and beliefs, expanding from the individual into the community, and she begins as Walker does, with bodily pain. As I have described in Chapter II, *Fire and Brimstone*, the religious community in the novel, works to isolate itself from the influences of the secular world, focusing on the reward to be gained in the afterlife and rejecting the fleeting pleasures of earthly life. While the church members believe that their bodies are merely temporary vessels for their immortal souls, the sensations of the body take a central role in their religious practices. In prayer, church members call on God to fill their bodies with the Holy Spirit, made visible and audible to others through raising hands, convulsing, and speaking in tongues. Scenes of prayer and worship are loud and active, "full of speaking and crying and spitting out all their anguishes to God" while the participants are "shaking and quivering with the intensity of it" (87). Obsessed with sin and the fear of divine retribution, the church members practice self-harm as punishment for sin and motivation for repentance. As Walker does in *The Color Purple*, Reynolds connects the dominant perception of God to bodily pain, but while Walker broadly implicates a white male God in the abuse of African American women, Reynolds specifically invokes Jesus Christ as the image of suffering that humans seek to emulate. Under the direction of Pastor Herman (Grandpa Herman to

Ninah, the young narrator), the church members sleep on nettles, put pecan shells in their shoes, and apply various means of inflicting constant and lasting pain on themselves in an effort to experience the pain of Christ's crucifixion and thereby grow closer to God. Scarry disputes the common explanation of religious self-flagellation as a denial of the body, arguing instead that it

so emphasiz[es] the body that the contents of the world are cancelled and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force. It is in part this world-ridding, path-clearing logic that explains the obsessive presence of pain in the rituals of large, widely shared religions as well as in the imagery of intensely private visions, that partly explains why the crucifixion of Christ is at the center of Christianity. (34)

The pain of the body minimizes worldly distractions by limiting the awareness of the believer to the sentience of his or her own body—nothing else matters. Nothing else stands in the way of the believer's interaction with God. Through the practices of self-harm and speaking in tongues, Reynolds emphasizes the body as a site of religious experience in both the ecstasy of the Holy Spirit and the pain of the crucifixion.

While church members experience religious passion, they also restrict the experience of passion exclusively to communion with God. Bodily pleasure, indulging any appetites for food, drink, or sex to any degree, is characterized as sinful. In a sermon on original sin, incited by the contrite confessions of the church member Ben Harback, Herman tells his congregation, "It's the curse of Eve . . . that we sin. That we live for our bodies, *feed* our bodies, *comfort* our bodies, and forget about our *souls* . . . .



And every time we open these mouths, to satisfy the wants of the body through word or food or drink, we turn our backs on Jesus (97). In this model, the body is the enemy of the soul, always endangering it. Having a body necessitates sin, so to fulfill even the basic needs to maintain the body is sinful. Hence, humanity is wretched and in need of constant forgiveness. The tortured and crucified body of God stands as the model of righteousness, and through fasting and self-harm humans approach the divine. To be entranced by the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues, even though the evidence of the event is a bodily act, is understood to be a momentary escape from the confines of the body (this as a contrast to the experience of physical pain). The ultimate goal is to be delivered to heaven, where one transcends all physical needs and desires and is entirely fulfilled by the presence of God.

While many Protestant denominations promote abstention from alcohol and extra-marital sex, Reynolds sets up an extreme example to illustrate the potential dangers in the kind of body-soul dualism that posits the mortal body as dangerous to the immortal soul. While Ninah narrates her growing fears and doubts, Reynolds presents the character Ben Harback as an example of the consequences Ninah and James might face for breaking the church's strict rules against sex. Where the fear of hell might be abstract and distant for readers, Reynolds ties Ninah's intense fear of hell<sup>48</sup> to the more concrete fear of bodily pain. When Ben comes to the church and confesses that he has gotten drunk, Herman orders that he lie in a grave overnight so that he can "remember" that "the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our

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<sup>48</sup> In Chapter II, I discuss Ninah's fear of hell in more detail.

Lord” (99).<sup>49</sup> Later, Ben goes before the congregation again and confesses that he has had a sexual relationship with Corinthian Lovell, a teenage girl from outside of Fire and Brimstone. Herman labels his behavior “fornication” and threatens to throw him out of the community. But wishing to be close to Jesus, afraid for his own soul, Ben chooses to accept penance if he is allowed to stay. Herman orders him locked in a cellar where he is secretly tortured for forty days and from which he emerges decimated and sick. Reynolds uses Ben’s punishment to intensify the community’s demonization of sex. As the utmost example of indulging the desires of the body, sex endangers the soul more than any other sin and is grounds for exile. Just as Herman holds up Ben as an example of a Godly man defeated by temptation, the church members characterize his partner, Corinthian, as a fallen woman, a “backslidden Holiness” girl who tempts him (124). The children are not allowed to speak to her at school, and Ninah is whipped for sitting with her on the bus. The punishment of Ben and ostracism of Corinthian foreshadow the fates of James, who kills himself, and Ninah, who is tortured and then locked away in her grandparents’ house, when their sexual relationship is revealed by Ninah’s pregnancy.

Throughout the novel, Reynolds portrays the instability of body-soul dualism by conflating religious and sexual passion, as implied by the double-entendre in the title of the novel. “Rapture” in this fundamentalist church refers to the return of Jesus when Christians will be taken to heaven but also invokes the common secular usage of the word, meaning intense, blissful—usually sexual—pleasure. Growing up in the church,

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<sup>49</sup> Reynolds quotes Romans 6:23 here.

Ninah has seen displays of religious ecstasy, but as she approaches puberty and develops a sense of sexuality, she becomes embarrassed by these scenes. Watching her sister Laura speaking in tongues, Ninah is

embarrassed to be hearing her voice stretching like violin strings, tighter and louder and screeching and punctuated by her frantic breathing.

Embarrassed to know what her tongue must be doing inside her mouth, rolling all over itself like it couldn't help it. It sounded like something she should be doing elsewhere. Not in church. (44-45)

Ninah has neither seen nor experienced a sexual encounter, but her discomfort with Laura's religious experience is rooted specifically in Laura's physical response.

Through Ninah's narration, Reynolds employs sexually evocative language to describe the movements and vocalizations of Laura's body. Ninah's sense that the scene does not belong in church, even though she has seen such events in church many times before, disrupts her understanding of the connection between religion and the body.<sup>50</sup> She fears that the sexual feelings that she is beginning to develop are sinful and that she is incapable of the sensual religious experience she witnesses, worried that she "might find it in some other place" (45).

Drawing on the rhetoric of religiously-based sexual abstinence campaigns, Reynolds appropriates the notion of "saving myself for Jesus" and makes Jesus the object of sexual desire. Ninah is troubled by her fantasies of kissing James, so she

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<sup>50</sup> Ninah's embarrassment is reminiscent of a scene in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf." Seeing her neighbor on her hands and knees groaning "Jesus, Jesus," the protagonist Mrs. May thinks "the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom" (306).

inflicts pain on herself, the first time she has done so without her parents' orders, to feel Jesus's pain. Getting more to the point, she tapes a picture of Jesus inside her underwear "for protection—because if I was saving myself for Jesus, I knew I had to get him there fast" (74). Because she is afraid of breaking religious laws, Ninah obsessively imagines Jesus when she feels sexual desire for James, hoping to quell her physical urges by replacing them with religious feelings. As a result, the lines between the sexual and the spiritual blur until Ninah cannot distinguish between them. When James touches Ninah's leg for the first time, she thinks she might speak in tongues, a response reserved for communion with God. That night, she dreams that she is kissing the wound in Jesus's side:

And then the wound in his side became a mouth, kissing me back, and I could slip my tongue into the wound, feel the inside of his skin with my tongue, circle it there, tasting him.

But when I looked back at Jesus he'd turned into James. (72)

In Ninah's dream, her efforts to know the pain of Jesus and her desire to experience divine love transform into her longing to kiss James. In his study of religious experience, Wayne Proudfoot finds that "at least some religious experiences are due to physiological changes for which the subject adopts a religious explanation" (102). According to Proudfoot, emotions are not simply direct responses to stimuli but are interpretive of physical sensations. Therefore, if a person holds religious beliefs, those beliefs are part of the interpretive framework shaping emotional response and leading to the attribution of the experience to religious phenomenon. Religious discourse so

powerfully penetrates the subconscious as to enter even into the dream life of the believer. When Ninah experiences a physical response to James, her emotional reaction to that stimulus interprets it as a religious experience, capable of making her speak in tongues, and leads to her dream conflating sexual attraction to James with religious desire for Jesus.

The community's denunciation of sex as a horrible sin leaves no room for understanding sex as a positive, or even normal, experience. While the community, of course, allows sexual intercourse between married couples, "seeking the pleasures of the flesh" is still characterized as sinful (130). The church members' only model of strong emotion is passion for Jesus, so James and Ninah begin to express their feelings for each other in religious terms. Allowed to spend time alone together as prayer partners, they use their prayers to say things to God that they are not allowed to say to each other. Praying aloud, Ninah says, "Help me and James to know your love, to be able to share with each other your love." James answers, "Let me love Ninah for you, oh Jesus. Let me be the one to show her your love" (94). These prayers continue daily until James tries to express a more particular love for Ninah, not the universal love of God but love singularly for her. Again, the words he uses for this love are couched in the love of Jesus: "Do you think that Jesus would say something to you that's just for you, not for anybody else? Not for the whole world. Just for you. Do you think he might say it through my mouth? . . . If you could be Jesus for me and I could be Jesus for you?" (115). James and Ninah eventually begin to have sex during their prayers meetings, "knowing Jesus all the way through" (134). Unable to reconcile the terrible acts Herman

condemns with the wonderful feelings they experience together, James and Ninah manage to develop an alternative definition of sex that they understand as compatible with divine law.

Ninah's pregnancy creates an interesting intersection with Walker's *The Color Purple*. Both Celie and Ninah, when confronted by adults about their pregnancies, claim to have been impregnated by God. These answers are given partly out of fear that their sexual activities will be discovered and partly out of confusion about what is actually happening to them. As young women who have never been taught about sex, both of them have an incomplete understanding of sex and reproduction. As they gradually learn by experience, they fill in the blanks along the way, constructing explanations that they can work into their worldviews. Celie's claim that God fathered her children serves as an example of her concept of the domineering and emotionless God she connects to her abusive stepfather. Ninah's half-belief that she carries Jesus's baby indicates a much different concept of her relationship with the divine. Ninah defines her sexual experiences as positive because she feels that they are expressions of intense spiritual love, the kind of love that she attributes to both human and divine relationships. She understands divine love to be intimate and reciprocal. While Reynolds presents many negative images of religion in her novel, including negative images of bodily religious experience, the core beliefs of this religious community actually enable Ninah's interpretation of sex as spiritual. Alongside the practices of self-harm, this community believes that individuals have personal and particular relationships with Jesus and that God can "fill" their bodies and speak from their mouths (152). At the center of this

belief system, which Reynolds frequently characterizes as dangerous and abusive, lies the possibility for redemptive love.

Just as Reynolds depicts Ninah's revision of sexual codes, she also shows her difficulty in maintaining her private beliefs when they are exposed to the judgment of the community. Even before anyone else learns about her pregnancy, Ninah and James imagine how the other church members will define their actions, knowing that they will be seen as sinful. Reynolds depicts Ninah's confusion through her inconsistent and contradictory narration. Ninah tells the reader, "Jesus just whirlwinded around inside me until he got so big that he started slipping out, and I think it happened the same way with James. Jesus just filled us up, so full we had to share it. It wasn't fornication" (140). Later when she knows that she is pregnant, she tells us, "I knew that I was probably having a baby, and that probably it was James' baby and not Jesus'" (155). Just a few pages after that, she thinks, "Maybe it *was* Jesus' baby—because if we really hadn't been sinning and had only been knowing Jesus through each other, then it couldn't be anything *but* Jesus'" (157). This back-and-forth rationalization of her sexual relationship is also depicted in the invisible rings that Ninah and James exchange when they privately pledge marriage vows to one another. Marriage would legitimate their activities, so when they both confess doubts about their behavior, Ninah consciously invents an invisible ring given to her by God, and James reciprocates (148). Later, Ninah wonders if she really did hear God speaking to her, denying in her own mind that she made up the whole thing (152). Reynolds reprises this conflict several times, as Ninah predicts that her son will also be born with a ring and ultimately tries to remember

“if invisible meant the same thing as imaginary” (189, 311). Through Ninah’s struggle to create and then maintain beliefs that are compatible with her own desires and the laws of her religion, Reynolds shows the process of reconciling disparate beliefs to be difficult and on-going.

Ninah does not undertake this task completely alone, as she has a constant model of “retelling old stories in new ways” (43). Leila, Ninah’s grandmother, quietly resists the teachings of her husband Herman by telling Ninah stories of Herman before he became a preacher and, more importantly, by telling her own versions of the stories that Herman uses in his sermons. In the first few pages of the novel, Reynolds presents the story of Leila’s parents in three different voices, first Leila’s, then Ninah’s, then Herman’s. When Ninah begs Leila to tell her the story of when her mother shot her father, Leila tells her that her father was gentle and her mother beautiful. Rejecting Herman’s label for her mother, Leila tells Ninah, “She weren’t no whore. She was a woman of passion” (4). Despite the horrible outcome of her mother’s adultery, Leila chooses to remember her father’s kindness and her mother’s beauty, refusing to blame either one. Placing it first, Reynolds privileges Leila’s memory and hints at the reinterpretation of sex and love that will occupy much of the novel. While Leila overtly contradicts Herman’s version of the story, she only speaks these words to Ninah, adding, “Don’t you tell him I said that” (3). Her admonition indicates a trust between Leila and Ninah but also teaches Ninah that resistance must be carried out carefully and, if necessary, secretly. She at once validates perspectives that stray from the singular voice of the church leader and restricts the expression of those individual perspectives. Ninah



values Leila's version of the story and adopts it as her own, narrating the story in her own voice in the pages that follow. Only after Leila and Ninah tell the story of the affair does the reader receive Herman's version, told aloud to the congregation. In the third telling of the story, Reynolds reveals the murder and Leila's role in protecting her mother by lying in court. Herman holds this story up as an example of sin and the necessity of begging God's forgiveness, but Ninah's and Leila's previous accounts assure that the reader has sympathy for both Leila and her mother. Through this sequencing, Reynolds foregrounds compassion and undermines judgment, laying the groundwork for Ninah's alternative value system.

Strengthened by the example of her grandmother, Ninah redefines the character Corinthian Lovell from a "whore" to a "woman of passion," mirroring Leila's redefinition of her mother. Contrasting the community's contempt for Corinthian as "the object of Ben's sins," Reynolds gives this character a biblical name famously associated with love (further emphasized by her last name) (132). First Corinthians 13:4-8 is a well-known passage on the nature of love, often read at weddings:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> While I have quoted the King James Version for most verses, here I have chosen to quote the Revised Standard Version because it is more popularly read aloud and presumably more familiar to Reynolds' readers.

As Ninah listens to Herman condemn Ben for his relationship with Corinthian, she thinks that “Corinthian probably just needed to be loved” and wonders if they had “prayed” together the way Ninah and James did, because “that kind of praying was outside the realm of judgment” (130, 124). Refusing to accept the label of fornicator for herself or to apply it to Corinthian, Ninah transforms Corinthian from an image of sin to an image of love. Reynolds sharpens the contrast between the compassionate and loving Corinthian and the judgmental and unforgiving Fire and Brimstone church in their reactions to Ninah’s pregnancy. While the church punishes and isolates Ninah, Corinthian treats her with kindness and sympathy when Ninah asks her for help. Corinthian helps Ninah cut class, hitchhike, and steal a pregnancy test, which Reynolds presents as one of the kindest acts in the novel. Just as Walker’s Celie sees Shug’s “evil” as a virtue, Ninah understands Corinthian’s disregard for religious and civil law as necessary and justified defiance motivated by love.

Where James had been consumed with guilt and despair, Ninah takes her pregnancy as an opportunity to persist in the work of redefining the concepts of God, sin, and love, made easier by her separation from the rest of the community. Quietly resisting the prayers that Herman offers on her behalf, Ninah spends the hours she has alone seeking the companionship of God, a newly benevolent force that starkly contrasts the vengeful God of Herman’s sermons:

All the time that I was growing and my baby was growing within me, all that time I spent alone, I prayed that God would show himself to me, would come visit and help me strangle the lonely.

He came to me in a thousand ways. Sometimes he came like a lamb for me to cuddle and nurse. Sometimes he sat in my bed and beat out hymns on the bottoms of my feet. Sometimes he rode in on the wind, his curly hair long and thick as mine, blown all over his head so that I was almost sure he was a woman, and he'd pull up my dress and put his mouth on my stomach and talk like a baby.

Sometimes he came like a thief in the night. Sometimes he wore lipstick. Sometimes he sent James. (205)

The images of God that Ninah clings to are drawn from scriptural images *and* from her own experiences of human love. The lamb invokes the New Testament image of Jesus as the Lamb of God, a pure and innocent sacrifice; Ninah sees the lamb as a creature to love. Reynolds creates here an image of divine love as reciprocal, and as it had been when James and Ninah were together, the act of loving is an act of prayer. Replacing a symbol of sacrifice with a symbol of love, Reynolds demonstrates a way to imagine God not as a distant and transcendent punisher of sins but as a part of the world offering and receiving love. Allowing herself to imagine different faces of God, Ninah combats her fear of being left behind after the rapture. She imagines God coming “like a thief in the night,”<sup>52</sup> the way that scripture promises the rapture, but here she is not left alone in terror but surrounded by love. She sees her human relationships infused with divine love as God appears holding her hand like James, wearing lipstick like Corinthian, or joyfully celebrating the life of her baby.

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<sup>52</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:2

Ninah's revisions of her community's stories, values, and images are imaginative processes that help her cope with the physical and psychological pain that she experiences as a result of her religious community. Early in the novel, even when she does not fully accept the rules and consequences set out by Pastor Herman, she internalizes them as part of ultimate reality. She interprets her resistance to the church laws as her own inadequate spirituality. In moments of greatest uncertainty, when her desires conflict most dramatically with her religion, she inflicts pain on herself as she has been taught. As she grows more confident in her own abilities to apprehend reality and define her values, she directs the work of her body from destructive self-harm to the making of artifacts, extending the objects of her imagination into the world. The first objects she makes are baby clothes and a skirt for her cousin Pammy. In direct violation of church rules, which prohibit women wearing pants, Ninah sews shorts inside Pammy's skirt, so that she can be more comfortable in active play, and lace on the bottom of baby pants, deciding that if she has a girl, that girl will wear pants. Although modest at first, Ninah's pieces embody her desire not only to rebel but to encourage others to do the same. When she grows tired of sewing, she builds a loom and weaves rugs to give away as gifts. Ninah's most symbolic creation is a rug she makes for James, incorporating not just the work of her body but the materials of her body, as well. Into her rug, Ninah weaves barbed wire, which James had once used to punish himself for his sexual relationship with Ninah, and the rope he used to tie himself to a log when he drowned himself. She then cuts her hair and weaves a cross into the middle of the rug. In creating a work of art from the devices of James's torture, Ninah remakes his

destruction into an emblem of creation. The cross is made of hair that Ninah cuts in violation of church rules and so both honors and subverts the religious symbol of sacred pain and sacrifice. After their son is born, Ninah finishes her rug with the blood of childbirth, staining the hair, wire, and rope with the material of life.

Even though Ninah, with the help of her father, has the opportunity to leave the community, she chooses to stay because she cannot bear to abandon her loved ones. Her presence, Reynolds shows, inspires others to speak out, not rejecting Jesus but challenging the dangerous practices and fearful restrictions that provoke terror and inhibit joy. Ninah's pregnancy and then her art make her internal questions visible to the rest of the community and lead to radical change in the church. Reynolds draws out the community's struggle and does not resolve the novel as neatly as Walker ends *The Color Purple*. Many characters are still in great turmoil, some caught in a violent hysteria when the novel ends. Reynolds's own experience of the reception of her novel mirrors in many ways the response of the fictional church members to Ninah's defiance. In an interview with Dale Brown, Reynolds describes her own religious upbringing as similar to the religious community in the novel in its attention to the rapture and the threat of hell. Reynolds experienced this environment as abusive and destructive, but she also still feels "a great deal of love for these people and for the community that I still have some access to" (275). Her desire to portray her experience in her fiction is part of her desire to cope with the fear of her past and her worries that some of her loved ones still raise their children "to be afraid of God" (276). She describes a mixed reaction from readers, some who thank her for her religious critique and others who tell her she is

going to hell. The most personally significant response for Reynolds came from her own mother:

My mom thought I was talking bad about Jesus. She only read into the book maybe thirty or forty pages before she quit reading it. She wouldn't keep reading it, and I had been close to her my whole life up to that point. It was very clear when we weren't talking. . . . My mama thought I was tearing down Christianity, and I really need her to finish it. I needed her to read it to the end because I didn't mean to be doing that. I was trying to open it up some. (278-79)

Part of her mother's struggle with the novel lies in her inability to relate to the fear and resentment that Reynolds describes as part of her religious upbringing. While Reynolds, like Ninah, was terrified of going to hell and unable to "get saved," her mother told her that others in the same church, in the same Sunday School classes as children, did not experience religion as frightening. Where Reynolds heard threats of hell, others received the promise of salvation and paradise. Where Reynolds could not be saved, others simply raised their hands and were confident in their redemption.

Walker's novel also met a mixed reception which, because of the blockbuster film that soon followed it, became a nationally publicized controversy. In her analysis of *The Color Purple's* reception, Jacqueline Bobo describes heated arguments about the book and film taking place in national newspapers, magazines, and television shows. Many critics accused Walker of betraying African American men with her negative portrayal of her male characters while the responses of African American women were

largely positive. Exemplifying the social quality of art, “the disputes over *The Color Purple*,” Bobo argues, “actually stimulated meaning production that connected with a larger movement of black women that is empowering black women and forming a potent force for change” (341). Like their protagonists, Walker and Reynolds try through their art to make internal conflicts public, addressing problems and encouraging questions that might lead to new understandings of social structures and institutions, including religion. But as Reynolds’s novel portrays, religious tradition has a powerful hold on many individuals and many communities. The beliefs that bring comfort to some torment others. The revisions, appropriations, and alterations that promise, for some, positive new spiritual awareness are received by others as blasphemy. But the dialogues incited by disagreements have the potential to produce material change. Walker’s unabashedly happy ending presents a profound hope that changes in personal awareness, advanced by the artistic endeavors that thrust the private imagination into the social consciousness, can lead to dramatic positive changes in the real lives of individuals and communities.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION:  
HEALING THE WOUND:  
WOMEN'S FICTION AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

In the novels I have analyzed here, authors draw on a shared concept of the South as a region saturated in Christianity to establish religious settings in which their characters begin spiritual seeking entwined with religious belief and practice, community and family relationships, and racial and gender identity. The ubiquitous and highly visible religiosity of the region provides a useful context in which to confront religious tradition and discourse. However, the women I study take on religious traditions that extend beyond the South, throughout American and global culture. The themes that I identify in the works of Southern women's writing about religion are prominent in the works of feminist theologians who challenge traditions of male-centered religious thought. As Adah of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* manipulates language to demystify and subvert the dominance of her father and his teachings, theologians Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Reuther challenge masculine religious language and develop new vocabularies to articulate feminine spirituality and non-sexist "God-talk." As August of Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* creates a woman-centered religion centered on a Mother-God, Elizabeth A. Johnson and Carol P. Christ insist on the need for female metaphors for divinity that stand equivalent to the male metaphors that dominate monotheistic religions. As Miranda of Gloria Naylor's



*Mama Day* turns to nature for supernatural wisdom and power, Sallie McFague develops an ecological code of ethics that treats the earth as the body of God, redefining sin as sin against Creation, including nature and other humans. As Ninah of Sheri Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* and Gracie of Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* struggle and fail to find meaning in their own sexual development, Penelope Washbourn argues that the biological processes of the female body should be treated as sacred experiences crucial to a woman's understanding of her own identity in relation to ultimate reality. Identifying these shared concerns, feminist theologians have taken works of fiction by women as primary, even sacred, texts.

Feminist theology developed in the 1970s, influenced by second-wave feminism as well as liberation theology.<sup>53</sup> The earliest feminist theologians were often the first women admitted into theology schools, many of them among only one or two female students in their programs. In her 1980 book *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol P. Christ describes her experience in a graduate program in Religious Studies at Yale in the late 1960s, where, after male professors and students discouraged her interest in religious ideas that were too "aesthetic," "poetic," or "emotional," she "began to wonder whether [she] had a different perspective on theology because [she] was a woman" (xi). Seeking out theological texts written by women, she found little with which she could identify in the works of Simone Weil and Teresa of

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<sup>53</sup> "The term 'liberation theology' was coined in 1968 by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Latin American theologian who wanted the Catholic Church in Central and South America to separate itself from the area's ruling elite and to voice a 'preferential option for the poor'" (Allitt 127). Liberation theology focuses on Jesus's work with the poor as a foundation for defending oppressed groups. The basic principles of liberation theology have been appropriated in the development of Black, feminist, womanist (African American women), and *mujerista* (Latina women) theologies.

Avila. She wanted to find “the story of a woman of [her] own time whose experience was more like [her] own,” which she discovered not in theological texts but in the literary works of Doris Lessing, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich, and Ntozake Shange (xi). Christ sees women’s fiction—“the new stories that women tell each other”—as articulating women’s experience, not only revealing but also creating meaning (12). She reads the literary works that she analyzes as both narratives of women characters on spiritual quests and as spiritual quests themselves. Connecting to other women through the reading of these books helps women to ground their own spiritual and social quests in “powers of being that are bigger than [their] own personal will[s]” (11).

For Christ and other theologians who follow her, women’s fiction articulates women’s experience by narrating the real challenges and struggles that women face and also by imagining the transformation of the world to overcome those struggles. Sharon D. Welch, for example, uses the novels of Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison in constructing her theology of an “ethic of risk” to oppose the “ethic of control” that dominates American middle-class culture. The fiction of the African American women that Welch takes as her examples depicts “a definition of responsible action when control is impossible,” locating within human relationships a divine grace that affirms life as opposed to transcendent divinity that devalues earthly existence (19). In *Religious Imagination and the Body*, Paula M. Coe examines the representations of women’s bodies in the poetry of Alicia Partnoy and the novels of Toni Morrison to

develop a theory of the female body as site of alternative spiritual knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Not only do feminist theologians use literary texts to illustrate their theological arguments, but they also treat women's fiction as theological texts themselves. In their 1989 anthology of feminist theology, *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, editors Christ and Judith Plaskow include among academic essays on theology an excerpt from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Adding no explication of the text, these pages stand on their own, treated as a work of theology by a woman "Naming the Sacred," as the section is titled. This move is not unusual, as Mary Ferrel Bednarowski observes that *The Color Purple* is one of "the most frequently cited sources in women's writing about religion" (120). Literary narratives bring life to abstract theological concepts and the treatment of these literary works as sacred texts stands as an example of the commitment of feminist religious thinkers to disrupt the categories of sacred and secular, theology and literature, and to find evidence of the divine in the world, within the imagination and art of humans. Literature shapes theology for those scholars who believe that women's literature authentically represents women's spiritual experiences outside of the constraints of male-centered theology.

In return, feminist theology has begun to shape women's fiction. Sue Monk Kidd's work stands as an example of the deliberate and transparent exchange between theology and fiction. Kidd was raised in a Southern Baptist home and grew up to marry a Southern Baptist minister. Early in her career, she wrote inspirational non-fiction

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<sup>54</sup> Shelia Hassel Hughes observes the tendency of feminist theologians to appropriate the literary works of women of color as examples of a shared otherness. Hughes calls for white women scholars to approach the texts of women of color carefully and self-critically so as not to universalize their particular experiences to all women and inadvertently obscure issues of race and ethnicity in favor of gender.

articles and columns for the Christian *Guideposts* magazine. Her memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* describes her mid-life coming-to-consciousness, realizing that she carried a “feminine wound” caused by internalized “messages of inferiority and self-denial” (28). Kidd tells the story of her break with patriarchal Christian tradition that was not a rejection of religion or spirituality but a recognition of the sacred feminine that would allow her to retain her sense of connection to ultimate reality but also heal her wound and affirm the value of her womanhood, restoring not only her self-worth but also her relationship with her daughter. It was after this awakening that Kidd began to write fiction. Kidd’s memoir is not only her story told from her own mind but a well-researched survey of feminist theology, the history of Christianity, and goddess mythology. As she shares her personal experiences, she quotes the works of male and female writers, connecting her individual, personal journey to a larger culture of seeking through academic and popular literature, fiction and non-fiction.

In her two novels, Kidd translates her spiritual experiences into fictional narratives of seeking, one from the point-of-view of an adolescent girl and one in the voice of a middle-aged married woman. In *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, for example, Kidd recalls hearing of an experiment in which flies were put into a sealed jar, and when the lid was removed, the flies did not fly away. She connects this image to her own feelings:

I’m in the jar, I thought.

I hadn’t been able to leave the tight perimeters of the old confining way of being a woman. It had been my entire world, and I questioned whether

I could live beyond its safety. Unlike the flies, however, I knew the lid was off. I'd struggled, myself, to open it, but now that I had, I couldn't seem to muster the daring and insurgent energy I needed to fly. (83)

Kidd repeats this image in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Fascinated by the bees in her room and eager to prove to her father that they are there, Lily traps them in a jar. Later, feeling guilty for caging them, she opens the jar, but the bees stay. When Lily finds herself alone in her home, desperate to break free of her father, she hears a voice say, "*Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open.*" Lily interprets this event as "a true religious moment, the kind where you know yourself spoken to by a voice that seems other than yourself, spoken to so genuinely you see the words shining on trees and clouds" (41). Just as Kidd depicts in memoir and in fiction the difficulty of taking action that will disrupt one's life, repeating the same metaphor for the fear of freedom, she also portrays the struggle of loved ones who witness a spiritual transformation. In her memoir, Kidd describes her husband's fear of her spiritual journey, "how scary it must be to have a wife of nearly twenty years wake up" (90). Their marriage was saved because they changed together, learning that "all good marriages are remarriages" (101). Here Kidd paraphrases feminist literary critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*, in which Heilbrun argues that women's real stories have been hidden by the expectations and assumptions of male-centered culture. In her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, Kidd presents the protagonist Jessie Sullivan desiring to cast off her other-centered life and to regain a lost sense of self. After separating for the length of the novel, Jessie and her husband reconcile, but she describes it as a new relationship: "Each day we pick

through unfamiliar terrain. Hugh and I did not resume our old marriage—that was never what I wanted, and it was not what Hugh wanted either—rather we laid it aside and began a whole new one” (328). The transmission of images and ideas from her research through her memoir and into her fiction demonstrates the extent to which Kidd is influenced by feminist scholars and theologians and the effort she makes in her fiction to imagine transformations of women and their loved ones to encourage feminine spiritual awakening and development.

While spiritual quests, to use Christ’s term, are certainly not new to literature, the texts I have analyzed here are part of an increasing interest in spiritual seeking through fiction that goes beyond the prolific output of Christian publishers. This trend has been energized in no small way by Oprah Winfrey, whose multi-media company has embraced and promoted a “hybrid faith” that is rooted in Christianity but infuses that tradition with Eastern and New Thought spirituality, characterized by “mysticism, universalism, idealism, and the belief in the power of thought to alter material reality” (Travis 1018). Through her immensely popular book club, Winfrey locates a source of spiritual power specifically within contemporary fictional texts that have the power to change people’s lives and to change the world. While Winfrey might not directly influence the authors I have studied (although a *Time* magazine reviewer suggests that Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* was written with Oprah in mind), her book club has

secured best-seller status for all of its selections, shaping the American literary market in substantial ways (Corliss).<sup>55</sup>

As popular culture media continues to promote individual spiritual seeking and as students in theological academies—including more and more women every year—are introduced to feminist theology, the openness to questioning, exploring, and integrating multiple religious belief systems is likely to continue. As the number of female ministers increases and more readers are introduced to religious ideas through fiction, the conversations among religious women are likely to become more open to new images of the divine. The increase in Christian publishing and the popular interest in the exploration of spirituality through fiction suggests that religion will figure prominently in American culture and fiction in the twenty-first century. In studying the literature of a post-secular culture, we must be aware of how the meaning of gender changes in religious contexts that are increasingly egalitarian rather than patriarchal. Religious pluralism has already changed American culture dramatically, and that effect is apparent in the South, as well. With the opening of the minds of Southern churches as well as the expansion of evangelicalism beyond the Bible Belt, scholars of Southern literature must look for the ways in which new religious consciousness shapes Southern identity and, as a result, Southern literature.

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<sup>55</sup> Of the books I treat in this dissertation, Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* were selected for Oprah's Book Club. While Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* achieved best-seller status without being selected as a featured book, Winfrey lent the film adaptation her support by devoting an entire episode of her television show to interviews with the cast. Walker's *The Color Purple* has also never been a book club selection, but Winfrey is closely associated with the novel. She has frequently spoken of her love of the book in interviews, starred in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation, and funded a Broadway musical adaptation.

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## VITA

Name: Sarah L. Peters

Address: TAMU Department of English, MS 4227  
College Station, TX 77843

Email Address: sarahlpeters@gmail.com

Education: B.A., English, Henderson State University, 2001  
M.L.A., English, Henderson State University, 2003  
Ph.D., English, Texas A&M University, 2009