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In this project I argue for new readings of Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and "The Foundations of the Earth," Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*, and of Ron Rash's poetry, short fiction, and his novel *Saints at the River* as texts that confront religious institutions that have become distanced from this intimate sense of spirituality. They critique religious communities that use their ideology to control sexuality, women, and nature.

Of these three authors, Randall Kenan is the most harshly critical of the religious community in his texts. Using sexuality as his primary way into this issue, he highlights the oppressive and silencing force of religion, and offers no spiritual solution to this quandary. His solution centers on a more humanist, secular form of acceptance for those on the margins, specifically those on the margins of sexuality. Lee Smith takes a more positive stance, even while critiquing the role religion plays in repressing female identity and independence. Ron Rash critiques man's manipulation of and separation from the natural world. He argues for a reconnection to the divinity of nature in which humanity has the potential to find a spiritual connection to something outside and bigger than itself.

LOOSENING THE BIBLE BELT: THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE
SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES IN THE FICTION OF RANDALL
KENAN, LEE SMITH, AND RON RASH

By

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To Jack and Hank

APPROVAL PAGE

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INTRODUCTION

As a child in the South, I was fascinated by the sheer number of churches in my small town of about 9,000 people. Nearly everyone I knew went to church or claimed membership in one of the churches that peppered the street corners of Hartsville, South Carolina. Religion was a part of the very landscape of my town and the neighboring towns all through the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. Not only did the physicality of the churches permeate the culture of the area in which I grew up, but also informed the worldview of the people with whom I worshipped every Sunday. Indeed, the religious community to which I belonged shaped much of the value system in which I operated as a youth. I certainly knew what right and wrong was, because, as the children's hymn goes, "The Bible tells me so."

The area in which I lived and was raised is not different from many other rural areas of the American South—religion is an important part of what makes the South distinctive, engendering it with a spiritual pervasiveness not found in other parts of the country. When asked why religion is always in the background of much of his fiction, William Faulkner said, "It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much I might believe or disbelieve—it's just there" (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 86). Indeed, this religious pervasiveness has created a very conservative, moralistic atmosphere in the south, leading journalist H.L. Mencken in 1924 to dub the South "The Bible Belt," a title that is still used and retains much of its meaning today. The negative implication of this

moniker highlights the stranglehold many people feel this conservative religious atmosphere creates for southerners and the South as a region. Despite this negative characterization of the South by Mencken and other writers and critics, religion has remained one of the defining features of the southern ideological landscape.

This project explores this religious landscape as seen through the eyes of Randall Kenan, Lee Smith, and Ron Rash, with particular emphasis on the growing separation between religion and spirituality. Wilfred Cantwell Smith discusses this separation in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, highlighting the four distinct ways we use the term “religion”: first, personal piety; second, the overt system of beliefs, practices, values, etc. as an ideal; third, the same as a historical and sociological phenomenon; and last, the general term “religion” (48 – 9). While this is a gross summation of his discussion, it is important to my project chiefly in terms of the first two uses. This project deals with the increasing gap between the personal fulfillment of religious spirituality and the concrete religious institution. Smith charts the historical shift from describing religion as an adjective—“faith, and its reference to the individual”—to thinking of religion as a noun—Christianity, or Baptist, or Pentecostal, for example (75). He discusses the shift from religion as a space for personal spiritual development to one that denotes the “institutionality” of religion (75 – 9). This idea is the cornerstone of this project, and it is through this lens that I examine and situate my discussion of the fiction of Randall Kenan, Lee Smith, and Ron Rash. Southerners all, they deal with this chasm in different ways and through different vantage points.

While the term “spirituality” can mean many things to different people, for this project I define it as a concept that carries at its center deep, often religious, feelings, beliefs, and concepts, including one’s sense of connection to others and the world, sense of purpose, sense of peace, and one’s ideas about life’s meaning. In this project I argue for new readings of Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* and “The Foundations of the Earth,” Lee Smith’s *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*, and Ron Rash’s poetry, short fiction, and his novel *Saints at the River* as texts that confront religious institutions that have become distanced from this intimate sense of spirituality. They critique religious communities that use their ideology to control sexuality, women, and nature.

Of these three authors, Randall Kenan is the most harshly critical of the religious community in his texts. Using sexuality as his primary way into this issue, he highlights the oppressive and silencing force of religion, and offers no spiritual solution to this quandary. Rather, his solution centers on a more humanist, secular form of acceptance for those on the margins, specifically those on the margins of sexuality. Lee Smith takes a more positive stance, even while critiquing the role religion plays in repressing female identity and independence. Her texts show characters seeking to restore spirituality to organized religion, specifically through a reconnection to nature akin to Cleanth Brooks’s idea of Christian synthesis.¹ For Smith, it is only through a reconnection with nature and

¹ Cleanth Brooks’s defines the idea of Christian synthesis as the harmonious state of man and nature before the Fall; he further states that although Man was ejected from Eden and separated from this state of harmony with nature, God’s act of grace makes it possible for him to achieve salvation (149). It is the breakdown of this Christian synthesis that Brooks uses in his discussion of Faulkner’s ideological stance on man’s relationship to both God and nature. For more information, see Brooks’s *On the Prejudices, Predilections, and Firm Beliefs of William Faulkner*.

the spiritual powers found there that her female characters can achieve the fulfillment and freedom of identity they so ardently search for throughout her texts. However, she highlights the dangers inherent in such a process, especially when her characters come close to a reacceptance of the outmoded and oppressive religious tenets from which they seek to escape. And finally, Ron Rash critiques man's manipulation of and separation from the natural world. He argues for a reconnection to the divinity of nature in which humanity has the potential to find a spiritual connection to something outside and bigger than itself.

While this project argues for a new reading of these texts based on this idea of spirituality, all three of these authors follow their literary predecessors in highlighting the critical perception that a sacramental vision underlies southern writing. Smith, Kenan, and Rash articulate their characters' problems in a distinctly spiritual vocabulary, finding in the religious landscapes of their fiction an insidiously damaging, alienating, and destructive set of beliefs and practices as well as offering solutions to the problems they identify with traditional religion. These authors, rather than fully embracing Brooks' idea that the Christian synthesis has broken down in modern Southern life and literature, seek to reconcile this breakdown of traditional religious ideology with their increasingly modern world. While Kenan is reluctant to offer any lasting religious reconciliation of these two opposing forces, both Smith and Rash seek to find ways to reclaim and retain this spirituality within religious communities that have lost this essential spirituality and have instead become institutional spaces that control sexuality, gender, and nature. They create new forums in the literature of the South that have the potential to force both

authors and readers to reconsider previously held notions of religious experience in the South, calling for a more fluid construction of spirituality and religion narrative in the South.

Kenan, Smith, and Rash follow in the literary footsteps of twentieth-century writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, who also examined religious life in the South within their fiction. And like Faulkner and O'Connor, they grapple with the ways religion becomes both a positive force and a negative force in the lives of their characters. Kenan, Smith, and Rash refuse to allow the religious communities of their fiction to ignore the very public and political issues of sexuality, gender inequality, and environmentalism. Earlier writers such as Faulkner also viewed religion in a similar way as the authors in this project; he, too, rejected the institutional hypocrisy and close-mindedness of southern religious communities. Indeed, he said of his own religious beliefs and those of southerners in general, "The trouble with Christianity is that we've never tried it yet" (qtd. in Fowler 174). Samuel Hill suggests that Faulkner's view of religion in the South still exists today:

To a sizeable and growing segment of the region's population, the South's traditional religion seems outdated and untenable. Many of these southerners have not abandoned the faith, however; rather, they are unable to respond to it through the typical regional forms . . . Even many who resist the traditional formulations cannot give up religion or get away from it. They are so deeply indoctrinated in the orthodox faith that they cannot articulate formulations of it, much as they wish they could. (*Encyclopedia 2*)

Faulkner's attitude toward religion is complex, but as Wilson points out, he is not ambivalent in his distaste for the Calvinistic ideals he saw dominating the religious landscape of the South: "Faulkner surely targeted this Calvinism as a source of Southern evil. The absolutism, fatalism, and self-righteousness that exist in the world of his characters and mightily afflict them stem as much from this source as from any other" ("Faulkner" 22-23). Wilson goes on to discuss Faulkner's main concern with religion: "In the end, Faulkner disliked the austerity and authoritarianism associated with organized religion" (Wilson, "Faulkner" 31). This is particularly pertinent to the authors on whom I focus this project; they, too, disdain and reject the cold and marginalizing nature of the modern church in the South. For Faulkner, however, this blending of Calvinist doctrine and Evangelicalism creates a distinct southern religious space, one from which his characters cannot escape. Wilson notes, "[Faulkner] converted the actual religion of the land into an apocryphal story in which Evangelicalism stood for a twisted striving toward salvation" ("Faulkner" 41). This suggests that Faulkner critiqued southern religious landscapes that fail to serve the humanity of the community; like Kenan, however, Faulkner does not envision a solution for this fatalistic religious atmosphere.

Alfred Kazin describes Faulkner's sense of religious fatalism as a "maze of determinism from which there is no escape" (12). While many of Faulkner's characters struggle with spiritual issues, Kazin argues that this determinism can be seen most clearly in the character of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Through Christmas's story, Faulkner ultimately provides a rich history of the spiritual pathology found in southern

religious narratives and on which the authors in this project build. Smith, Kenan, and Rash expand Faulkner's critique of the narrowness of the southern religious experience, seeking (and sometimes finding) alternative paths for spiritual inclusion and fulfillment.

Kenan, Smith, and Rash also find precedents in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. She also examined the inescapability of religion and its presence in the lives of her characters. *Wise Blood's* Hazel Motes, the main character and head of his own "Church of Christ Without Christ," articulates this tenacious and unrelenting view of spirituality. For Hazel, Jesus moves "from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark..." (10). O'Connor's short stories and novels are permeated with characters who must come to terms with their own spiritual shortcomings, usually engendered by a sense of moral superiority and the appearance of goodness. Characters such as Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" must come to violent, often fatal, terms with their spiritual hubris. O'Connor suggests that God's grace is the sole path for spiritual redemption and fulfillment. And while most of her characters come to realize that religious devotion is not characterized by public appearances of piety but by actual spiritual humility, the religious community in her fiction ultimately is the same community that the authors in this project find problematic in terms of accepting difference, other-ness, and those on the margins.

In short, authors such as Faulkner and O'Connor provide context for the fiction of Kenan, Smith and Rash. The spiritual landscapes of earlier authors such as O'Connor are similar to those found in Kenan, Smith, and Rash; however, the latter writers bring into

sharp relief the problematic nature of this homogeneous religious ideology. They attempt to redefine spirituality for those who do not fit into the normative snapshot of the southern religious landscape. However, they recognize the problems inherent in bucking a system so firmly entrenched in the cultural, political, and emotional lives of southerners. In showing both the successful and the unsuccessful journeys into alternative spiritual fulfillment of their characters, they give their readers a messy, complex, and ultimately more realistic view of modern religious thought in the South.

Chapter One: Randall Kenan and the Problem of Heteronormativity in African American Religious Narratives

Randall Kenan was born in 1963 in Brooklyn, but he soon left the North to live with his great aunt in Chinquapin, North Carolina. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and published his first novel *A Visitation of Spirits* in 1989. His short story collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* followed in 1992 (Hunt 411 – 13). Just as Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha County, the fictitious community in which he sets much of his fiction, so Kenan creates for these works the fictitious town of Tims Creek. Kenan's Tims Creek, based on his own hometown of Chinquapin, North Carolina, is a small rural eastern North Carolina town with a religious community that adheres to a strict code of morality and narrowly defined ideology that allows for little difference among its members. As a Southern African-American gay man living and

working in the South, Kenan writes from a decidedly unique perspective—from the margins—on the religious narratives of rural North Carolina.

Critical treatment of Kenan’s fiction is relatively sparse, owing to his youth and few works of fiction. Eva Tettenborn's recent article titled, “ ‘But What If I Can't Change?': Desire, Denial, and Melancholia in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*,” deals with Kenan's employment of melancholia as a mode of cultural resistance to the loss of the oral culture of his Eastern North Carolina home. However, she claims that Kenan does not allow this idea of literary melancholia to become a point around which the African American community can rally and garner strength, as in other texts of African American fiction that employ this idea of melancholia. Instead, "melancholia becomes the feeling of an isolated and painfully lonely person who has no one with whom to share his loss of identity because he cannot and must not admit in a heteronormative patriarchy that he is a gay black man" (250). My discussion of Kenan’s use of an alienated and lonely protagonist follows this idea; I, however, situate Horace’s alienation and loneliness as products of a distinctly religious oppression. The cause of this melancholia on the part of the main character stems from both his religious community’s refusal to give voice to his unique spiritual position as a black gay man as well as his own inability to reconcile this position with the religious tenets he has internalized. His search, then, becomes for an appropriate spiritual community that accepts him and allows him to accept himself.

Other critics focus on issues such as Kenan’s fiction as African American ethnography, the importance and strength of collective autobiography and memory, queer

theory and its application to Kenan's fiction, and the power of "plain folk" as catalysts for cultural resistance within Kenan's work.² My discussion of Kenan's fiction attempts to add the religious element to the conversation about Kenan. Indeed, all of these critical positions gain greater clarity and significance when viewed through the lens of religious narrative.

In his novel *A Visitation of Spirits* and his short story "Clarence and the Dead," Kenan explores the ramifications of homosexuals' self-silencing of their own voices because of fear of rejection and the forced silencing by their religious community. In each, Kenan offers no solution to these problems through organized religion. He suggests that the solutions must be sought outside the religious sphere altogether; the answers do not lie in the spiritual realm. However, Kenan shows his readers the potential for positive religious acceptance in his short story "The Foundations of the Earth." In it, Kenan shows us the possibilities that open for the marginalized once they and the religious community refuse to be silent about sexual difference.

Building on Charles Nero's discussion of the African American religious narrative in the South and critics Sharon Holland's and Ron Simmons' assertions about the problems with homosexuality confronting the modern African American religious community in general, I explore in *A Visitation of Spirits* Horace's inability to accept himself as a homosexual based on his insistence on the veracity and immovability of the tenets of his religious community.

¹ See Holland, Hovis, McKoy, McRuer, and Wester for more information on these critical approaches to Kenan's work.

Equally important in *A Visitation of Spirits* are the treatment of Horace and the messy, complicated problem of homosexuality he represents by the church.

Representative of the church is Jimmy Green, the pastor of Tims Creek Baptist Church and Horace's cousin. Green plays a dual role in the novel, as both the representative of the church and of Horace's pious family. It is through Green's character that Kenan provides the reader with his most scathing portrait of the narrow-mindedness of the southern religious community.

The chapter continues an examination of this complex relationship between homosexuality and religious acceptance in Kenan's short story "Clarence and the Dead." This story also highlights Kenan's rejection of a religious community that refuses to accept alternative lifestyles and stubbornly adheres to a narrowly defined religious moral code. It is only in his story "Foundations of the Earth" that Kenan provides his readers with a glimmer of hope for the creation of a narrative of inclusion rather than rejection of those who find themselves marginalized by their own religious community.

Kenan ultimately asks readers to collaborate with these characters and with each other in order to find a more fluid view of spirituality—one that can even step outside of religion into the secular—that reflects the changing nature of community, identity, and individuality in today's society. In an interview Kenan discussed his own distinction between spirituality and religion: "But I do sort of believe that stories should have some moral center, because that's where stories came from. Of course, you can travel to other cultures and other moral systems. But it would be very difficult for me to create

something that violated my sense of morality, which is not necessary Judeo-Christian all the time. It's much more humanistic" (Hunt 420).

Chapter Two: Lee Smith and the Problem of Gender in Appalachian Religious Narratives

Lee Smith was born in 1944 in Grundy, Virginia, a coal town close to the Kentucky border. She began writing as a child, and the distinct religious atmosphere of Appalachia informed her earliest writings as a girl. Her first story, about Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell running away to the west to become Mormons, deals with two major themes that Lee explores in much of her fiction even today—religion and the complexities of place, both geographically and internally. She identified these themes thus: “You know, religion and flight, staying in one place or not staying, containment or flight—and religion” (Ostwalt 100). These ideas are also the major themes of the pieces I explore in this project, *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*. In this chapter I argue that Smith calls for a redefinition of female spirituality within this specific Appalachian religious narrative, not through the traditionally prescribed roles within the organized church. Rather, Smith calls for a new way of thinking about spirituality, one that allows for a more fulfilling religious experience for women who are marginalized and stifled by the strictures of the organized church. Smith would agree with Wilfred Smith’s assertion of a growing separation between religion as an institutional force and the spirituality it

attempts to engender in its followers (75). I argue that *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill* attempt to reestablish a connection between the two.

Much of the critical response to Smith concerns her use of ethnography, her exploration of storytelling and oral construction of Appalachian reality, and the female community as a source of strength and subversion in Appalachia. And while many critics have examined the role of religion in the fiction of Lee Smith, much has been made of the strength of the church within her stories. Indeed, Susan Ketchin, Rebecca Smith, and Linda Byrd Cook explore the positive religious implications within *Saving Grace* and many of Smith's other novels. This chapter builds on these and the arguments of other critics such as Jacqueline Doyle as well as the discussions of southern culture and religion posited by Elaine Lawless and George Brown Tyndall, using them as springboards for my discussion on the ultimate limitations of organized religion that Smith presents in both *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*.

The first novel I discuss is *Saving Grace*, the story of Grace Shepherd, the daughter of a roving, self-anointed Pentecostal preacher. Her journey, as Smith points out, is one of religion, and the battle between flight and containment. Grace must choose between the spiritually unfulfilling religious narrative of her father's church and the life-affirming spirituality she encounters in and around Scrabble Creek. Each section of the novel represents the eras of Grace's life as she searches for salvation via the men in her life, all of whom fall short of the Jesus-like savior which Grace seeks. I assert that it is her return at the end of the novel to Scrabble Creek on her own terms and having found her spiritual center through place rather than institution that provides Grace with the

spiritual fulfillment she seeks throughout the novel. Smith, however, complicates this new Eden Grace discovers by allowing her to return to the organized church at the end of the novel. The bells calling Grace back to the church as institution become alarms that Smith uses to warn of the dangers of polarizing what should be joined—a sense of spirituality that connects us all and the organized institutional tenets of religion that sometimes serve to further alienate the Other.

I move from *Saving Grace* to *On Agate Hill*, the story of Molly Petree and her own religious conversion. Like Grace, she negotiates the tensions between the traditional religious narrative written for her by her family and community and the search for a spiritual narrative of her own, one that celebrates her femininity and individualism. She finds this spiritual fulfillment, like Grace, within nature and the distinct sense of place she internalizes throughout the novel. Molly, however, goes further than Grace in engendering this sense of natural divine spirituality in her life; indeed, the end of the novel finds Molly not on her way back to church, following the church bells as if they were the Pied Piper. Instead, Molly abandons organized religion as seen through the symbol of the house in which she was raised, opting instead for a more fulfilling spirituality found in nature.

While I don't think Lee Smith is advocating a total shift away from organized religion, I do think she is highlighting the complicated situation in which many women in Appalachian religious communities find themselves, torn between the need for a spiritual home and the strictures of the organized church. Grace certainly yearns for this spiritual fulfillment, yet Smith complicates her journey by having Grace return to the church of

her father. Molly, on the other hand, retreats completely from the organized church and finds fulfillment in the land of Appalachia. Thus Smith delivers a hard message to the religious communities of this area: connect organized religion with the spirituality it professes or risk further attrition and decay. This chapter adds to the rich critical conversation surrounding Lee Smith's fiction by providing a larger and richer understanding of the ways religion and gender connect, as well as the way women negotiate their own sense of self and individualism with the larger and tightly plotted spiritual narratives in which they operate.

Chapter Three: Ron Rash and Religion, the Environment, and Sub-par Carpentry

Ron Rash was born in 1953 in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. His experiences in this mill town that grew up as a result of the out-migration from the rural Appalachian mountain communities infuse his fiction with a distinctly Appalachian voice. He has remained close to this Appalachian region, both geographically and emotionally, attending college at Gardner-Webb University and currently teaching at Western Carolina University. His poetry, short fiction, and novels record the stories, culture, and experiences of the people who live in towns similar to Boiling Springs, as well as the stories of their ancestors who lived and worked in the mountains of North Carolina. His works highlight the strength and resilience of the people of Appalachia in the face of

manmade lakes, raging rivers, and dying crops (not to mention a dying way of life in the mountains).

Most of the critical response to Rash's poetry and prose centers on his themes of memory and its relationship to these Appalachian communities. Critics laud his insistence on remembering and reimagining the lost mountain communities as well as his realistic approach to the thriving communities of the region. While these approaches are important and add to our understanding of Rash's works, it is as important to recognize Rash's insistence on bringing spirituality into the discussion.

My discussion of Rash and the spirituality of the environment comes at the end of the chapter, and fittingly so: his view of religion and spirituality connect most closely with Wilfred Smith's ideas on the separation of religion and spirituality. In *Saints at the River*, he provides not only a picture of alternative spiritual communities in which his characters find (or don't find) fulfillment; he also goes further than this, exploring in his short story "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth" the effects of this separation on the church as an organized institution. His postmodern view of the church and the commodification and superficiality with which its parishioners approach religious responsibility provide a chillingly realistic picture of organized religion in the contemporary South. Throughout his fiction he warns of the dangers of taking for granted the spiritual power found in nature, the problems with both willingly rejecting the divine power of nature and forced separation from it, and the devastating ineffectiveness of the church in the modern South. While his characters are not as outwardly religious in the vein of Lee Smith's Virgil Shepherd and his Jesus Name Church, they are religious in

the sense that they internalize a sense of right and wrong, of sin and redemption, found in traditional Christian religious communities. They also believe in the spiritual power of the land they work and on which they live. It is here that Rash's characters find the most personal fulfillment, a kind of spiritual satisfaction that is disappearing rapidly.

This chapter starts with a discussion of Rash's short story "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth," in which Tracy, a member of the community of Cliffside, North Carolina, narrates the darkly comic events that surround the Easter project of the Cliffside Baptist Church to reenact the crucifixion of Jesus at Easter. The project goes awry, seemingly due to faulty construction of the crosses, and Tracy's humorous yet telling narration suggests that the problem runs much deeper than the literal sub-par construction of the crosses; the problem is ultimately with the flawed religious community itself. Ultimately, Rash suggests that modern religious institutionalism isn't strong enough to support its congregants. Their religious community does not provide any lasting spiritual fulfillment; instead spirituality is commodified and bastardized for personal gain. Rash suggests that this religious landscape is unsuccessful in providing the people of Appalachia with authentic spiritual fulfillment.

I then discuss Rash's poetry and his novel *Saints at the River* as portraits of Rash's insistence on the divinity found in nature. In these pieces, Rash provides a different model for spiritual fulfillment. It is not the organized church of Cliffside Baptist that provide the people of Tamasee with a sense of spiritual fulfillment; it is the communion with the river and its environs that allows the community greater access to the divine. Water is the central metaphor for this divine presence, and it is one that

includes the affirmation of life and the specter of death for those that do not respect its power. Maggie, the protagonist, has separated herself from Tamasee, the town in which she was raised as well as the river that runs through it. Consequently she grows more spiritually unfulfilled the farther she gets from nature. It is only her reentry into the community and a reconnection with nature that allows her a tenuous reconciliation with her spirituality. Through this novel, Rash warns us that a physical and emotional relationship with nature provides the closest spiritual connection to the divinity most traditional religious communities claim to provide. For Rash, the path to spiritual fulfillment is not as obvious as in Smith and Kenan; his fiction is populated with the lost, and their loss is tied directly to their separation from the Appalachian foothills and mountains.

CHAPTER I
TOWARD A NEW SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY: THE CHANGING ROLE OF
RELIGION IN THE FICTION OF RANDALL KENAN

North Carolina writer Randall Kenan explores in his fiction the religious implications of homosexuality both for those who identify as homosexual and for the religious community to which they belong. Both his short fiction and his longer works highlight the difficulties the gay community finds in their search for an accepting spiritual space. Kenan paints two pictures, proposing two outcomes for those who search for this accepting spiritual community: In his novel *A Visitation of Spirits* and his short story “Clarence and the Dead,” Kenan shows us what happens when homosexuals are coerced into silencing their own voices because of fear of rejection and are silenced overtly by their religious community. His short story “The Foundations of the Earth” paints a more positive picture; in it, Kenan shows us the possibilities that open for the marginalized once they and the religious community refuse to be silent about sexual difference.

In *A Visitation of Spirits*, Kenan deals with the difficulties of being black and gay in the rural South. Moreover, many of these difficulties stem from the religious atmosphere of this region, namely the explicit (and implicit) condemnation of homosexuality and adherence to a heteronormative epistemology based in traditional Judeo-Christian doctrine. Kenan illustrates these difficulties through the story of Horace

Cross, a smart, troubled gay teenager trying to reconcile his sexuality and the religious atmosphere in which he is raised and through which he determines his sense of guilt, punishment, and ultimate condemnation. As Sharon Holland points out, “the heterosexual paradigm in African American culture was primarily nurtured by the black church,” and thus a discussion of Kenan’s treatment of homosexual oppression is incomplete without taking into account the religious narrative through which his characters navigate (271). Ron Simmons goes further into this problem, discussing the difference between acceptance and tolerance of gayness within the black church. He asserts that there is “not so much a fear of ‘homosexuals’ but a fear that homosexuality will become pervasive in the community. . . . [A] homophobic person can accept a homosexual as an individual friend or family member, yet not accept homosexuality” (211). Perhaps so, although in Kenan’s world, Horace’s homosexuality is not accepted by his family and ignored by his friend and pastor Jimmy Greene, in whom he attempts to confide.

Charles Nero points out the inconsistencies in the African-American spiritual community of the South. He first affirms the inclusive and liberating nature of the African-American church:

Historically, religion has served as a liberating force in the African-American community. Black slaves publicly and politically declared that Christianity and the institution of slavery were incompatible as early as 1774, and . . . argued for their freedom by combining the political rhetoric of the Revolution with an appeal to the claims of Christian fellowship. Christian churches were some of the first institutions blacks created and owned in the United States. (238)

The religious community, therefore, can be seen as one of the first places that created in African-Americans a sense of freedom, inclusion, and community formation. However, Nero goes on to point out that the black religious community has not been without fault on the issue of oppressing its constituents. Indeed, he points out examples of sexism and, as it most relates to this discussion, prejudice based on sexuality. Nero points out that many contemporary black religious leaders have “openly made homophobic remarks and have adopted heterosexist policies” (239). He recounts instances of religious leaders coming out as gay and being fired, harassed, and even exorcised because of this admission (239-41). While not indicative of the black religious community as a whole, these instances make plain many of the fears and discomfort of contemporary Southern black religious communities. It is this type of religious community in which Horace is raised and that Kenan critiques through Horace’s story.

Horace is unsuccessful at finding a place within the spiritual narrative of his community that allows him to be a gay black man in Tims Creek, and it is through Horace’s suicide that Kenan engenders this disconnect between a spirituality that claims to be inclusive and based on love unencumbered by prejudice and that of its adherents who are marginalized due to the realities of the prejudices brought to bear by others in the religious community.

The topic of homosexuality in the black community is not unique to Randall Kenan; his research into the life and fiction of James Baldwin highlights the difficulties homosexuals face in finding a voice in a community intent on silencing that voice. Some critics have made connections between Baldwin’s discussions of homosexuality and

those of Kenan. Robert Bone describes James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* in these terms: "deliberately opaque," "vague," "disembodied," and self-digested," and attributes these qualities of *Giovanni's Room* to the difficulty in voicing homosexuality itself, much less the experiences of homosexuals to come out and give their sexuality voice in a silencing world (267). Indeed, the same thing can be said about Kenan's *Visitation of Spirits*. The form of the novel itself suggests an inability to give voice to the problem of homosexuality within the religious narrative of Tims Creek. It is divided into vaguely connected sections that are narrated by different characters: an unnamed narrator who recounts Horace's struggles through the novel; Jimmy, the preacher and spiritual leader of the community whose confessions reveal his own accountability in Horace's fate; and Horace's older relatives, whose opaque narratives give context to the stifling and oppressive community to which Horace belongs.

The title of the novel and the titles of its different sections highlight Kenan's placement of religion in the center of Horace's struggle. Spirits are ever-present in the religious lore and practices of the Southern church scene, and there are many accounts of visitations by these spirits. The main sections are entitled "White Sorcery" and "Black Necromancy," both of which conjure images of spiritual practice, albeit not those centered around the traditional ideals of the Judeo-Christian church. Several subsections within the novel are entitled "Confessions," in which the characters reveal personal struggles with both their fellow parishioners and with their own spiritual belief systems. The word "confessions" also conjures religious images, as it is one of the cornerstones of Catholic religious ritual. Most of the characters in the novel express some form of

problem or disillusionment with their current spiritual state. Indeed, Horace's spiritual unhappiness becomes the cornerstone for his suicidal journey.

Kenan begins the novel with a biblical epigraph: "The Lord is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silent before him. I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the House of the Lord . . ." (1). This verse comes from the book of Habakkuk and expresses gladness at being welcomed into the fold of the righteous as delineated by the Judeo-Christian doctrine. Kenan uses this verse to show several things about the spiritual community in which he centers his characters and their struggles: first, it places the story firmly in a religious context; second, the latter part of the verse suggests a willingness—indeed, a need—by the speaker to enter into this community and to be accepted by it; third, and most interestingly, the first part suggests that silence is a necessary requirement of the followers of this Lord. The epigraph is also interesting in that it conflates two Bible verses—the first from Habakkuk, and the last from Psalm 112. The book of Habakkuk deals with the punishment of the wicked by the Lord for their sins. Habakkuk openly questions the Lord's lack of involvement in the problems of Habakkuk's people. God responds by listing the punishments he will bring upon the wicked and ends with the statement Kenan chooses for part of his epigraph. It highlights God's reiteration of his ultimate power and, more importantly, the mistake of questioning his ultimate wisdom. The Psalm, on the other hand, praises both the faithful for their loyalties and promises eternal life as well as a prayer for Peace within Jerusalem, referencing thrones of judgment within the house of the Lord. Both of these ideas are cornerstones of the Christian faith, and, more interestingly, both of these ideas are ones

that Horace struggles with throughout the novel. This novel begins firmly in the religious realm, and Kenan makes it clear that Horace's struggle is a spiritual one. It is this struggle to find inclusion in a spiritual community in which Horace is not marginalized that moves the narrative forward.

The novel opens with Horace Cross—whose name also centers the text within a religious context and alludes to Horace as Christ figure—considering a physical transformation. The decision marks the first time in the novel that we see Horace trying to find a place in which he has “grace.” He rejects several species because of their lack of grace, stating the importance of having this physical attribute: “Dogs lacked the physical grace he needed. More than anything, he wanted to have grace” (11). The grace he mentions is two-fold: he wants to remake himself into a physically graceful being, but also he needs the spiritual grace that frees him from his own position of guilt and marginalization. His need for physical grace reflects his metaphoric clumsiness and inability to fit into his current community. The reader doesn't know yet what exactly keeps him from integrating into his community. Only later do we see it is due to his homosexuality that he feels marginalized by both his family and his spiritual community. Kenan delays the introduction of Horace's homosexuality to highlight the fact that his homosexuality is merely one facet of his personality, not the defining feature of it. When his family and community reject him based on this facet, the reader is able to feel the injustice of this rejection. Kenan allows the reader to empathize with Horace's struggle and his need for acceptance. By delaying our discovery of the source of his problem, Kenan implicates us in the spiritual dilemma in which Horace finds himself and makes it

difficult for us to separate ourselves from Horace once we find out about his homosexuality. Through Horace's story, we as readers must also come to terms with our own spiritual attitudes and prejudices regarding homosexuals within the Christian fold.

As Horace plans his transfiguration and escape from the physical world, he describes his unique situatedness between two communities, between two spiritual landscapes:

Of course he was not crazy, he told himself; his was a very rational mind, acquainted with science and mathematics. But he was also a believer in an unseen world full of archangels and prophets and folks rising from the dead, a world preached to him from the cradle on, and a world he was powerless not to believe in as firmly as he believed in gravity and the times table. The two worlds were not contradictions in his mind. (16)

Horace relies on both the intellectual world and the religious world for self-identification; it is imperative for him to find a place within his spiritual community in order to be happy. When he can't reconcile his sexual identity within this world, he looks for another way to free himself into another, alternative spiritual space in which he can be who he is without guilt or fear of abandonment. Thus, he searches for an answer and finds it within what he considers a spiritual text written by "a man of God" that claims he can transform himself into another form. This alternative form mirrors Horace's search for an alternative spiritual community into which he fits. His "form"—that of a gay man—cannot find peace or acceptance in his current spiritual community, so Horace looks for a different form.

As Horace prepares to cast the spell that will transfigure himself, he is emboldened by this new spiritual realm—that of the occult, found in the tomes that describe the spell which he will use to conjure the demon that will allow him to transform. He is “armed not with the armor of righteousness and the shield of truth, but with the arcane knowledge that he firmly believed was the more powerful” (25). He has rejected the spiritual system set forth by his Judeo-Christian upbringing and begins his search for a different spiritual narrative in which to flourish.

Horace’s search leads him to an important and devastating conclusion, however. After he completes his incantation and hears the voice of the spirit he describes as “his salvation,” Horace realizes that the only way to reconcile himself with his current spiritual community is to kill himself. He feels the freedom in finally accepting himself and his sexuality, although he knows that this is in direct opposition to the tenets of his religion. This acceptance—and with it, the ultimate rejection of the religious system that condemns Horace as a gay man—creates a euphoria in Horace:

For it was just as preachers had been preaching it all the years of his life, warning: there are wretched, wicked spirits that possess us and force us to commit unnatural acts. It was clear to him now: he had been possessed of just such a wicked spirit, and the rain was a sign to prove that he could not be purged. Why fight any longer? said his brain. (28)

Horace understands that he will never be accepted in his church, and he sees through this alternative ritual that this “spirit” that has possessed him is himself, his public acceptance of his sexuality. He rejects a spiritual narrative that does not allow the expression of that

sexuality. He goes, then, with his new community of “hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and wargs—aberrations like himself, fierce and untamed, who frolicked about him with hellish glee at his acceptance of his doomed, delicious fate” (28). Kenan uses this metaphor of an occult community, one of devilish proportions, to suggest that open expression of homosexuality within a spiritual narrative necessitates the rejection of the strictures of the Judeo-Christian cosmology. The fact the Horace appropriates the language of his oppressors to describe his fellow outcasts suggests that he himself cannot escape his spiritual community completely and must, therefore, escape it in the only way that he can see—not through the rejection of a religion that silences him, but through killing himself.

Kenan exposes the exclusionary practices of Horace’s religious community by appropriating both traditional religious symbols and biblical language. The first symbol is the concrete church itself. As Horace, led by his “demon,” enters the First Baptist Church of Tims Creek, his description of the church creates an oppressive, exclusionary picture of his spiritual community. Horace calls the front doors of the church “two tall whitewashed gates” (68). The word “whitewashed” suggests a sense of covering up and secrecy, as if the church is covering up its undesirable parts—in this case, the fact that Horace is homosexual is embarrassing to the church and, as we see later in the text, the leaders of the church strive to silence Horace as he tries to express his homosexuality. It also suggests antiquation, as if the church, and its rejection of Horace, needs figurative updating. Kenan also uses the church bell as a symbol of the need for the church to embrace a more accepting ideology. As Horace enters the church, the demon tells him to

ring the bell. This becomes for Horace a largely symbolic act—just as the bell rings on Sunday to announce to the community that church is in session, so Horace rings the bell now to announce his arrival in the church that silences him.

In addition to these traditional symbols of the church, Kenan appropriates biblical language to reinforce his condemnation of a religious community that rejects Horace because of his sexuality. Horace flashes back to a crowd of his relatives and fellow churchgoers, all singing for the Lord to show them the way. His grandfather, an elder of the church and arguably the most important member of the congregation, presents himself to Horace as a shaman, a magic man who holds the church's respect, admiration, and even fear. His grandmother is the creator and nurturer of the church, and her hands give life to the church community: "In the beginning were hands, and hands were the beginning; all things that were made were made by Hands, and without hands was not anything made that was made" (72). Kenan's appropriation of these biblical images and his association of them with members of Horace's family create the main source of tension in the novel. Horace begins to understand that his family, represented by and intimately connected to his religious community, ultimately rejects his very being, his identity as a homosexual man. Therefore, Horace must create another identity for himself and find another community in which to flourish. Unfortunately, Horace's created community consists of goblins, demons, and wraiths, all of which exist outside of the physical and Christian world and serve to separate Horace even further from any sort of true connection with his community. Because Horace can find no other spiritual avenues

in which he can assert his identity as a gay man (ultimately because there are none that will accept and recognize him as such) he turns to killing himself in order to free himself.

Within this episode, Kenan uses another recognizable Christian symbol to lay bare the silencing effects of this religious community on the marginalized: the baptismal font and the idea of rebirth at the heart of baptism. As Horace hears his demonic host calling for his baptism, he remembers his own baptism, remembers his own panic from being submerged and out-of-control, wondering, “How did the water cleave that old wicked person away and recharge his body with a new, righteous and saved person? Did the bubbles that escaped from his trembling mouth contain that evil, former self?” (85). Even then Horace recognizes the confusion of identifying with a sexuality outside of the one espoused by his religious community. Indeed, after his baptism he remembers wishing to “be” his grandfather even though he knew he could never be like him—nor does Horace want to be like him. It is important to note that with this revelation Horace returns to the present, alone and trembling in the church pulpit, without expressing these mixed feelings to his grandparents at the moment of his baptism. He keeps silent, effectively marginalizing himself from his religious family, knowing that to express this most taboo of subjects would mean rejection and abandonment. The demons that surrounded him earlier are gone, and Horace begins to hear the voices of his church family, although they appear to him only as shadowy vapor and indistinguishable forms. They give voice to that which Horace has not been able to bear hearing from them should he reveal his homosexuality to them: “Wicked. Wicked. Abomination. Man lover! Child molester! Sissy! Greyboy! He saw no faces, know no names, but the voices, the

voices . . . “ (86-7). Kenan highlights through this description the problem at the heart of Horace’s trouble: the effects of voicing his own affirmation and agency as a homosexual man in this community would be disastrous. The community would “voice” their own disapproval and hatred of Horace’s voice.

Horace’s next visit takes him to his elementary school, where, in his later years there, he begins to understand the importance of fitting into the heteronormative reality of his community: “He had a feeling that if a girl saw something in him, perhaps the reflections of a man to be, perhaps irresistible cuteness, or perhaps just the fact that somebody nice liked him, somebody outside his family and church members, then he would be whole” (96). He craves acceptance and approval by those who would give him neither if they knew he is homosexual. Thus, Horace bases his identity and self-worth on a reality that by definition denies him identification or agency. He realizes, of course, even at that age, that his growing attraction to other men precludes him from the society in which he craves acceptance; this, in turn, causes Horace to hate both himself and Gideon, the local homosexual boy whom he first berates and then seduces. He relates his guilt over his latent homosexuality specifically to the Old Testament sense of divinity and punishment preached in his church and espoused by his family and other church members: “The image of God he carried in his head was a bleak one . . . who took no foolishness and punished true to his word. This God thundered in his mind after orgasms; this god bellowed in his head when the need arose. Is that when the truth uncovered itself and stood naked before him? When the thought of a woman failed to arouse him, and the thought of a man did?” (101). Horace internalizes the homophobic

attitude of his religious community and effectively remains silent in an attempt at self-preservation; his demonic posse gives voice to Horace and his spiritual quandary. Unfortunately, his demons lead him to what he believes is the only way out of a community that does not allow sexual difference—suicide.

Horace's internalization of the unacceptability of homosexuality becomes even more apparent as his demons take him back to his first sexual encounter with Gideon and the days leading up to it. When Horace first feels attraction toward Gideon, his thoughts reveal both his own complicity in the community's rejection of homosexuality and his refusal to deny what he knows to be his true identity:

There was also the terror, the familiar question he refused to acknowledge. It was a horrible voice saying: You must cease this sinful thinking! Are you mad? Do you realize what will happen? But he could not help it, he was not willing to part with this strange new feeling. And as for the danger, the real danger, it only made his obsession seem all the more worthwhile. (152 – 3)

The “real danger” to which Horace alludes is the eternal damnation the church advocates for those who identify outside of mainstream heterosexuality. He decides to renounce his homosexuality, opting for sports and girlfriends and the camaraderie of other jocks after whom Horace pretends not to lust. Once again Gideon brings his shame into sharp relief, challenging the heteronormative mask Horace has chosen to wear. Horace hits Gideon in order to silence his openly voiced assertion that Horace is gay, a telling action on Horace's part, in light of his own silence about his sexuality. Indeed, any mention of it by Gideon send Horace into a silencing rage, the aftermath revealing Horace's wish for

an alternative space in which he can express his identity as a homosexual man without fear of retribution or rejection: “He imagined another world, another place, in which he could have gladly complied with Gideon’s wish and fallen into lusty, steamy, lascivious abandon—but no” (164). The last two words seal his silence and, although this incident happened years before the story takes place, his memory of them effectively begins Horace’s downward spiral that leads him to his current spiritual despair.

In addition to the scenes in the church and at the school, the graveyard scene becomes an important and appropriate metaphor for the situation in which Horace finds himself. Horace joins the summer theatre and becomes embroiled in an affair with one of the players, falls in love with the star, and experiences a sexual freedom he has not previously encountered. Although this time in Horace’s life can be seen as potentially fulfilling and self-affirming, Kenan’s use of setting and diction highlight the marginalization of this community and the silencing Horace has come to project upon himself and have projected upon him by communal religious sentiment. The theatre itself is outside of town—a twenty-five minute drive for Horace; its location is metaphorically significant as well. It is located outside of mainstream Crosstown society and therefore not a part of the moral and religious obligations Horace feels so trapped by. Another significant facet of the theatre for Horace is his grandfather’s hesitance to let Horace have a summer job there. His grandfather, a stalwart member of his religious community and one of the strongest influences on Horace’s religious development, becomes the barometer for acceptance in Horace’s life. His mistrust of the people Horace works with that summer provides another rejection of Horace’s identity, further marginalizing him as

a homosexual man. Thus the theatre represents a dual rejection for Horace; he is marginalized both physically and ideologically from his religious community during that summer, and his actions the night of his suicide reflect this alienation.

The theater also represents Horace's complicity in his own alienation from his community. He sees his reflection in a mirror, donning a costume and white face paint: "[T]he reflection of himself continued to cover his entire face with white goo, deftly, expertly, with fingers . . . that seemed accustomed to this odd activity" (220). The act of covering his face represents the figurative mask that Horace has worn to hide his sexuality from those that would be most likely to reject him for it: his grandfather, grandmother, and relatives like Jimmy Green. All of these members also represent the religious community that marginalizes and refuses to recognize Horace's homosexuality. The symbolism of the mirror is one on which Holland expands. She asks the question, "[H]ow can [Horace] find an image of gay subjectivity, a mirror for himself, when this particular presence has been erased from the body of knowledge or given to him as a manifestation of the depraved inducements of Satan" (279). It is this direct refusal of acceptance by his spiritual community that causes Horace to begin his search for another body in which to live. His new body, as reflected in the mirror and given form in the demon that commands him, is a metaphor for a new spiritual narrative, one that will accept his gay subjectivity as part of the overall spiritual plan for humanity.

Even as the theater reveals Horace's complicity in his own oppression, it ironically becomes the place Horace finds to be most empowering in his acceptance of himself as a gay man and his realization that his own happiness must be found

somewhere other than Crosstown. It is during his summer at the theater that Horace begins a torrid affair with Antonio, an actor from New York, which fills him with sexual energy and elation as well as guilt and self-doubt. Both Antonio (Horace's actual lover) and Everett Church Harrington (the actor for whom Horace harbors a silent and unconsummated obsession) are not from Crosstown, highlighting the idea that Horace can only express his sexuality in a place and with a person or group that is found outside his current community.

This marginalization of Horace and his fellow actors culminates in the orgiastic party in the cemetery at the end of the summer after the play wraps for the season. Horace remembers the party at the cemetery in terms of religious heresy and silencing damnation: "Like witches in a coven under a full moon, like wild wolves tearing hungrily at one another's flesh, like hogs wallowing in their own excrement and sin and lonely in articulateness, they were left to this for expression, this for comfort, this for attention, this for love" (230). Horace's demon brings him here in order to show Horace his ultimate path, his only choice for freedom from the oppression and marginalization he feels at the hands of his community: "He thought of his family, of what they wanted of him; of his friends and what they offered him; and of himself . . . what did he, Horace truly want? Suddenly life beneath the ground had a certain appeal it had never had before. It was becoming attractive in a macabre way. No more, no more ghosts, no more sin, no more, no more" (231). Horace has internalized the marginalization of his identity as a homosexual and has come to the only expression of independence he can find—suicide.

Horace's own self-abnegation and self-denial comes to a poignant climax as he sees not the harlequin in the mirror but himself, beckoning him toward self-acceptance: "I'm what you need . . . you can follow the demon if you want. It's your choice. Stop whining, Horace, it said. Stand firm and be—" (234-5). His reflection, no longer painted or harlequined, offers Horace a way out of the self-hatred Horace feels. The real Horace, however, cannot free himself from the cycle of guilt and shame thrust upon him by his family, friends, and religious community. Horace's encounter with himself in the costume area of the theater "had been Horace's redemption, and Horace said no" (234). Horace makes his choice not to find a new spiritual path or community, and his murder of his reflected self foreshadows his own suicide.

Although Horace's refusal to accept himself as a homosexual fuels his desire to escape his community and, indeed, his very life, the role his religious community plays in his downfall is paramount to Kenan's message about religious responsibility and acceptance of those who fall outside of "normal" parameters. James "Jimmy" Malachai Greene is the pastor of Tims Creek Baptist Church and the main representative of the religious community for both Horace and the rest of the characters in the novel. Kenan aptly titles Jimmy's sections "Confessions," recalling the religious act of admission and atonement for sin. In his confessions, Jimmy calls up the dead who have haunted him—his mother, his wife Anne, Horace—in an attempt to understand and reconcile his own culpability in their deaths. He denies Horace a chance to express his homosexuality, calling it a phase of experimentation. Thus, Jimmy takes at least partial responsibility for Horace's fate; and as the representative of the religious community, Jimmy implicates his

own brand of Christianity in the silencing of Horace and highlights the rigid and hypocritical morality of a church that is unwilling to accept difference in its constituents.

Noel Polk, in his memoir *Outside the Southern Myth*, describes with chilling accuracy the religious community in which Horace finds himself and for which Jimmy is the representative: “Baptist theology is based in blindness . . . willful blindness to human nature that makes Baptists unable to think rationally about something as natural as sexual desire. Baptist theology is based in a world view that simply reverses itself, like a photo negative: it is a blindness that believes itself vision, a bondage that believes itself freedom, a poverty that believes itself abundance, a death that believes itself life” (153). Ultimately this is the religious landscape Horace tries desperately yet fails to bind himself to; in this failure he recognizes the need for a transformation of his spiritual geography, one that he ultimately cannot fulfill. And while Polk recognizes that the people he encountered during his years at Picayune First Baptist Church were for the most part living, kind folks, both he and Kenan suggest that it is the institutional tenets that prevent them from seeing people as they really are, for the human connection that they crave and which they try to find through religion.

Polk suggests: “What Baptist fundamentalism most insidiously does is rob you of a claim on your self. . . . The church constantly insists, in sermon and in song, on the evils of the ego, and the virtues of denying your self except when devoting it to Others” (182). The irony here, of course, is that Jimmy, as the church’s representative, refuses to see Horace for what he is, a homosexual man looking for acceptance within his religious

community; instead, the doctrines in which he believes, by their self-negating prophecy, deny Jimmy the ability to see Horace and thus to help him and accept him.

Kenan exposes Jimmy's hypocrisy as a church leader in a few key sections of his "Confessions." One such section comes as Jimmy is tending to a dying parishioner, Marguerette Honeyblue, a woman who, with her husband, sells bootlegged moonshine and other forms of alcohol illegally and rarely attends church. Marguerette asks her daughter for a beer instead of water, and each of the women in the room looks to Jimmy to gauge his reaction: " 'Go ahead, Miss Sarah.' I was trying to be as straightforward and non-authoritarian as I could—as if I had any authority in that room" (109). Marguerette, her daughter Viola, and Sarah Atkins understand that Jimmy represents the church and is therefore representative of the establishment that would most certainly look down on Marguerette for taking a drink. Jimmy wants to convey to them that he is a new brand of religious leader, however:

How could I communicate that I was not, did not want to be the holy and pious dictator of a pastor they had been used to for all their lives, that my very presence had nothing to do with my condemnation of their way of life There was no way to say: I have not come here to judge you. To say: I want to introduce a new way of approaching the Christian faith, a way of caring for people. I don't want to be a watchdog of sin, an inquisitor who binds his people with rules and regulations and thou shalt and thou shalt not. (110)

The irony in this situation is that Jimmy, no matter how much he wants to believe he is ushering in a new brand of spirituality into this religious community, reinforces the rigid, exclusionary form of Christianity in his dealings with Horace. Kenan creates in Jimmy a

version of religion that espouses inclusion on the surface, but insidiously rejects difference in any form. This is most evident in another telling scene in the novel when Horace seeks out Jimmy's advice on Horace's emerging homosexual feelings.

This scene plays out on one of Jimmy's "confessions," and it crystallizes both Jimmy's (and by proxy the religious community in general) unwillingness to accept Horace's difference as well as Jimmy's own admission of culpability in the events that lead up to Horace's suicide. Horace approached Jimmy after church and admits not only his homosexual feelings but also his affair with Gideon. Instead of taking Horace seriously and helping Horace find a way to accept himself, Jimmy dismisses Horace's feelings as nothing more than adolescent experimentation. He tells Horace, "It's all part of growing up." He rationalizes, "I have reason to believe it's just a phase. I think this is something that will pass." Jimmy does the most damage to Horace when he states, "I've known you all your life. You're perfectly normal" (113). These statements highlight the heteronormativity inherent in Jimmy's belief system—Horace is deemed "normal" if he accepts that his burgeoning feelings for men are only a phase and not an integral part of who he is.

When Horace expresses fear and uncertainty in his lack of ability "to change" this part of himself, Jimmy tells him, "These . . . feelings . . . will go away. Just don't give in to them. Pray. Ask God to give you strength. Search your heart. Take it to the Lord" (114). Jimmy begins to contradict himself, telling Horace, "Don't dwell on it," and in the same breath saying, "This is a very serious matter" (113). Horace's confusion is understandable, given Jimmy's ambivalent stance on the matter. It is telling that Jimmy's

lack of vocabulary for Horace's homosexuality and his hesitancy to actually name what Horace is feeling only serve to silence Horace and marginalize his agency in dealing with his admission and acceptance of his own homosexuality.

Horace's family also contributes to his marginalization as a homosexual; his family, tied deeply and for generations to the religious history of Tims Creek, together with Reverend Barden, Jimmy's predecessor, condemn Horace for piercing his ear on the Thanksgiving Day before his suicide. Reverend Barden sits by in implicit acceptance as his grandmother Johnnie Mae compares his piercing to something done by "a little girl" or "one of them perverts" (184). The "perverts" Johnnie Mae refers to are obviously those in the homosexual community, who have stereotypically been identifiable to other homosexuals by their pierced ears. His Uncle Zeke often rebukes Horace for associating with his white friends, and when Horace calls them bigots, Johnnie Mae reveals her own hypocrisy with a tirade against the injustices she has received in her life: "You have no idea what bigotry is. No idea what prejudging is. Do you have any idea how many white men have called me girl and aunt? I don't qualify for prejudice. I know all the facts already" (187). Although Johnnie Mae refers to racial inequality, she internalizes the same ideas of bigotry and prejudice as she applies it to her own intolerance of sexual difference. Horace now has endured the rejection of both his family and his religious community and realizes the hopelessness of his search for a community in which his sexuality will be accepted. Holland points out the importance of this search for a distinctly Southern community that will accept homosexuality. Horace's family is important in the success or failure of this search, as it is firmly entrenched in the religious

history of Tims Creek. Holland says, “As if refusing to camouflage the importance of having a simultaneously black and gay subjectivity, Kenan places Horace’s struggles in a changing South, at the table of not only a black family but one with a churchgoing legacy to fulfill” (276). This changing South, Kenan suggests, must make room for difference in its religious landscape in order for people like Horace to find acceptance within its institutions.

After Horace’s death, Jimmy ruminates on both Horace’s inability to find peace in Tims Creek and his own failings as a religious leader:

He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was concerned. First, he loved men: a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn’t quite know who he was. That, I don’t fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from the cradle on. (188)

As this passage comes in one of his confessional sections and after Horace’s death, Jimmy understands his own failure to practice tolerance. As the representative of the religious community, Jimmy also admits he can never accept Horace either. The “normal deviation” Jimmy identifies is one he himself characterized as abnormal just a year before Horace’s death under the tree after church during his conversation with Horace. Kenan uses Jimmy, Horace’s family, and other members of the Tims Creek community (which all represent factions of the religious community) to show the problems inherent in the religious community in which Horace finds himself—or outside of which Horace

finds himself. Although Jimmy realizes at the end of the novel that he and others in the community played a part in Horace's suicide, it comes too late to help Horace. Thus, Kenan highlights the dangers the religious community faces when it chooses to ostracize and marginalize those who do not identify with the main tenets of their religion. Kenan also shows the alienation, confusion, and guilt those who are "othered" by their religious community feel—Horace symbolizes the internalization of rejection by family and community just as Jimmy symbolizes the community which rejects.

Kenan's picture of religious communities and the problems inherent in dealing with those within the fold who are different is startlingly negative, but *Visitation* is not Kenan's only statement concerning religious intolerance and the search for an acceptable and accepting spiritual narrative. In his short stories "Clarence and the Dead" and "The Foundations of the Earth," Kenan allows his characters varying degrees of success at redefining their spiritual landscapes—some cannot find a space in which to find spiritual fulfillment due to the unwavering exclusionary practices of their religious communities; others are more successful at reappropriating spiritual narratives to include a wider range of beliefs and practices.

In his short story "Clarence and the Dead," Kenan highlights the community's resistance to difference and its insistence on exclusion that stems from this strict heteronormative landscape of Tims Creek. Kenan tells the story of Clarence, a young boy who converses with the dead, passing along information, advice, and warnings to members of the spirit's family. Clarence is not, however, labeled a pariah due to this ability; on the contrary, the communal narrative voice of the story suggests that people in

the community accept this gift of Clarence's with minimal difficulty, other than the occasional impatient irritation from Clarence's grandparents and caregivers and the uneasy chagrin of those in the community to whom Clarence imparts his messages.

In fact, Clarence reveals the unspoken secrets of the community with impunity—he uncovers incest, adultery, greed, lust, and violence through his conversations with the dead, yet nothing upsets the community so much as his conversation with Ellsworth Bats. Ellsworth's story is tragic indeed—his wife, Mildred, whom he adored, dies in a house fire, leaving Ellsworth a shattered shell of a man. When Mildred reaches out to Ellsworth through Clarence, Ellsworth forms what the community calls an “unnatural attraction” to the boy. It is only here that the community puts their collective foot down and attempts to keep Ellsworth away from Clarence. The heteronormative code of morality spelled out by the church becomes the basis for the rejection of the relationship between Clarence and Ellsworth. As Sheila Smith McKoy states, the story ultimately becomes one “about misdefinitions of morality because the community is unable to distinguish between natural and unnatural desires” (30).

McKoy goes so far as to characterize the relationship between Clarence and Ellsworth as “a classic love tragedy” in the Shakespearian sense—she calls Clarence and Ellsworth “lovers who are kept apart by societal restrictions” (30). Although I think McKoy erroneously assumes that the Ellsworth is infatuated with Clarence himself instead of the reflection of his wife in Clarence, I agree that the community's sense of morality and decency does not allow homosexual interaction between these two

characters. They cannot allow a relationship that pushes the bounds of their moral code and normalizes that which is deemed “other” within their community.

Because of the community’s insistence on keeping apart these two “lovers,” Ellsworth unsuccessfully tries to kidnap Clarence and throws himself off a bridge in despair over losing his Mildred again. Clarence dies soon after, and the community makes sure to bury the whole sordid affair: “Of course we put all this out of our minds, eager to forget . . . [n]o one talks about Clarence, and God only knows what kind of lies they’d tell if they did” (22). Both Clarence and Ellsworth are decidedly unsuccessful at finding an alternative religious landscape for those that fall outside of the community’s spiritual narrative. By showing that the community would rather ignore and, moreover, create a fiction that better serves their moral code, Kenan highlights the dangers of openly challenging the exclusionary and restrictive heteronormative code of morality set down by the religious landscape of the community.

He does, however, see a glimmer of hope for a redefinition of difference within Tims Creek’s oppressive religious system in his story “The Foundations of the Earth.” In this story, Kenan directly addresses the church’s influence on morality, highlights the shortcomings of this reductive and limited code of spirituality, and reimagines the spiritual landscape as one that includes those previously denied entry into the fold. The story begins with narrator Maggie Williams, a respected member of the Tims Creek community, sitting on her porch on Sunday after services with the “round and pompous” Reverend Barden, other members of the First Baptist Church of Tims Creek, and Gabriel, her “special friend” and lover of her recently deceased grandson. It is significant that

Kenan uses Biblical symbolism and analogy in this story; indeed, we are introduced to Gabriel's biblical significance as a harbinger of change as he arrives with Maggie's grandson's body and serves, according to Maggie, as "an interpreter for the dead." As McKoy suggests, Kenan ironically uses the Bible, the document the religious community of Tims Creek uses to support their assertions of exclusion and rejection of difference, to validate gay identity.

Maggie is in the process of accepting both Gabriel and what he represents—her grandson's homosexuality—yet the church's representatives "chose not to see him, and when they did, it was with ill-concealed scorn or petty curiosity or annoyance" (53). Indeed, when Gabriel expresses confusion over the company's shock that Maggie's tenant is plowing on the Sabbath, the Reverend at once scolds Gabriel and regurgitates Biblical scriptures concerning the holy nature of the day. Maggie becomes irritated with the group, showing her growing rejection of the normalizing and exclusionary practices of the church as evidenced by the spiritual leaders gathered at her house. She soon establishes herself as unwilling to align herself with the spiritual community represented by Barden and Henrietta, the head of the Ladies Auxiliary at the church: "At this stage of her life she depended on no one for anything, and she was certainly not dependent on the approval of these self-important fools" (53).

Through Maggie's flashbacks, we come to discover that Maggie herself accepted the normative practices of her spiritual community; she "chose to ignore" the pain caused by her grandson's death and the news of his homosexuality. Maggie reveals to the reader her rigid and religiously fundamental ideas about the sinful nature of homosexuality,

remembering how she resented Gabriel for his “sinful lust” and calls his relationship with Edward an “abomination.” Maggie’s flashback takes us to her dream in which she rages at God for doing this to her, and the reply coming back to her to be patient, look for understanding and acceptance. This answer suggests that Kenan envisions a religious ideology based more in New Testament tenets of acceptance and inclusion rather than the fire-and-brimstone rigidity of Old Testament theology. When the reader comes back to the present, it is to a different, changed Maggie Williams, one who rejects the traditional religious doctrines of exclusion. Maggie comes to understand through her association with Gabriel and his connection to her grandson that she “was being called on to realign her thinking about men and women, and men and men, and even women and women. Together . . . the way Adam and Eve were meant to be together” (63). It is in this comment that Kenan most clearly expresses the need for a reevaluation by the spiritual community of the definition of difference. He calls for a new spiritual code that rejects heteronormativity in favor of acceptance.

For all the positive strides that Maggie makes within the text, however, Kenan is a realist, ultimately; he doesn’t characterize Maggie as one who does not struggle with her own acceptance of her grandson’s sexuality. She thinks when she meets Gabriel that he looks so “normal” and even asks him why he doesn’t want to “be normal.” She still struggles with her own preconceived notions of normality and acceptability throughout the text. It is at the end of the story that Kenan allows Maggie to step outside of the restrictive religious community that provides the underpinning for her discomfort with the notion of homosexuality. She is free to search for a spiritual narrative marked by a

new sense of community with Gabriel as well as a different kind of spiritual journey, one of inclusion and acceptance instead of exclusion and rejection. Maggie settles the argument between the Reverend and her tenant farmer over working on Sunday by saying: “Morton Henry. You do what you got to do. Just like the rest of us.” She contemplates the difficulties of going against her spiritual leader in favor of Henry, and makes her choice between her old spiritual path—characterized by the Reverend and Henrietta—and her new one. Kenan allows Maggie to “relearn” a new path to spiritual fulfillment, as hard as this might be. In this way, he provides a more positive, hopeful albeit tentative step toward a new spiritual landscape for both his characters and for his readers.

In his fiction, Randall Kenan speculates about the effectiveness of the homogenous landscape of southern religious communities as a tool for inclusion and communal change. Through his novels and short stories, Kenan sends a message to the black community—believe in something higher than yourself, but look within yourselves to find the courage and strength to fight for a spiritual geography that makes room for difference and alternative identity formation. To that end, community in these stories becomes the place in which new definitions of racial, sexual, and spiritual identity appear—ones for which the characters cannot find validation from the church.

Holland admonishes contemporary critics for treating the “subtext of gay and lesbian critical and literary endeavors” within the canon of African-American literature “as secondary to developing a literary project with an emphasis on its procreative practices” (270). If this sidelining of the creative importance of gay and lesbian writers

within the African-American literary community in favor of the current heteronormative paradigm continues, Holland warns, the community itself will build the walls against bringing “(all) black subjects back from the dead, with the attending agenda of normalizing whiteness” (270).

This is especially true of Kenan’s community in *Visitation*. By placing this responsibility to give the gay and lesbian community a voice squarely on the shoulders of the African-American church, Kenan calls for a reinterpretation of spirituality. Indeed, through Horace’s failure to find a place within the religious community in which he lives, Kenan demands a revision of the oppressively homogenous spiritual narrative of the Southern communities from which both he and his fictional mirror, Horace, have been raised. Kenan uses the text to comment on the larger community as well. The implications of failing to find a space for the "other" have repercussions in the black community in general. While these texts are centered on how the religious community handles otherness, and while Kenan specifically challenges it to redefine what constitutes "normal," he also widens his message to include for all us a warning against the demonization of those who are different from the dominant white power structure. If we don't recognize the fallacy of the othering process, Kenan points out through his texts, we risk further reinforcement of racism and marginalization in the future.

The postmodern nature of the both *Visitation* and of his short stories themselves reflect the splintering and varied views of spirituality, identity, and community that are the benchmarks of postmodernism in general and the African-American community specifically. Kenan ultimately asks readers to collaborate with the character and with

each other in order to find a more fluid view of spirituality that reflects the changing nature of community, identity, and individuality in today's society.

CHAPTER II
“SEARCHING FOR HARD GROUND IN A WORLD OF SHIFTING SANDS”:
FINDING FAITH AND NEGOTIATING SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES IN THE
FICTION OF LEE SMITH

Lee Smith creates in her fiction a rich and intricately detailed portrait of the religious communities of Appalachia, highlighting the exotic rituals and peculiar preaching styles of many traditional Appalachian Christian denominations. Many of Smith’s stories and novels focus on the lives of the parishioners of these churches, characters who are profoundly affected by their spiritual beliefs. Her female characters in particular struggle with their roles as women within their churches and their own definition of womanhood; oftentimes these roles are at odds with one another. Her novels *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill* are no exception. In these novels, Smith revises the prescribed roles for women in their religious communities. Both novels find their main characters reappropriating spiritual connection, not through church but through nature. Smith allows Grace in *Saving Grace* to recognize this path to spiritual fulfillment, but goes further with Molly Petree in *On Agate Hill*. Molly rejects the traditional religious narrative for one grounded firmly in the natural world.

George Brown Tindall, in *The Ethnic Southerners*, highlights many of the myths and stereotypes surrounding the people, foodways, dress, and even the physical buildings

of the South. He suggests that mythology “has had so much to do with shaping character, unifying society, developing a sense of community, of common ideals and shared goals” (42). In this chapter, I add to the list those religious myths and narratives which guide so many Southern lives. Grace Shepherd and Molly Petree look for a viable myth around which to construct their spiritual reality. They “identify[y] with [their] native region as a ground for belief and loyalty” (Tindall 39). As positive as this sounds, these myths also serve to hold back members of the community that are not part of the powerful few. In the case of the religious communities of rural Appalachia, Lee Smith creates in her rural Appalachian communities women who fall prey to the oppressive nature of the patriarchal religious narratives of the communities in which her characters live.

Historically, the South has been a region in which religion, namely Christianity, has flourished. Evangelical Protestantism has been called the backbone of Southern religious thought, and there is a continuing sense of religious rigidity in many of the more fundamental denominations whose churches pepper the Southern rural landscape from the Carolinas across the Bible Belt into Mississippi. Susan Ketchin suggests that the driving forces of evangelical Protestantism lay in the ideals of unavoidable sin and the divine grace that comes only from heaven: “The distinguishing features of this religious tradition are its strict adherence to biblical teachings and private morality, the notion of a real and active presence of God and Satan in the world, the belief in a actual existence of heaven and hell, and an emphasis on preaching the gospel and saving souls” (xii). In the South, Ketchin argues, this spiritual narrative is guided by the inherent depravity of human beings: “Strong Calvinistic doctrines such as the absolute sovereignty of God and

the depravity of human beings, the soul's salvation by grace alone, and the infathomability of Divine Will constitute a significant underpinning of southern evangelicalism" (xii). Samuel Hill, Jr. explains the penchant for religious rigidity in the South: "the southern church is something unique in all Christendom in its single-minded focus on salvation, its sense of assurance, and its rejection or simple unawareness of other versions of Christian experience" (117).

Lee Smith's *Appalachian South* reflects these deep religious traditions, many of which reinforce what Anne Goodwyn Jones calls the myth of the Southern lady. Jones describes the mythic Southern lady as "compliant," "sacrificial," and "uncontroversial," among other characteristics. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw discusses the female paradigm in terms of nineteenth-century writers, contending that these writers lauded the ideal Southern woman as one who "was encouraged to shape, repress, modify, and monitor her behavior to create her own perfectness" (74). And although twentieth-century writers have long taken issue with this female stereotype, Prenshaw points out that "the mythology of ladyhood has continued, paradoxically, to maintain a spirited vitality" (74). Indeed, the image of the submissive and mysterious southern lady still exists for many twentieth-century writers, as seen in Smith's characters not only in *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill* but also in her other novels as well. Prenshaw also discusses the role of voice in the Southern women, pointing out the nineteenth-century feminine characteristics of silence and submission. These had disastrous effects on Southern female self-expression and self-authorship: "the hopeless bind [of silence] was nearly absolute: to remain silent was to acquiesce to voicelessness and invisibility; to speak in one's own behalf, to assert

one's view or conviction, was not only to forfeit the respect and attention of powerful men, as well as that of most women, but to threaten the foundation of the South itself" (78). This silence extended in the religious life of Southern women as well. Southern women were supposed to reveal their hardships and dissatisfaction to the Lord in prayer, away from the ears of their superiors, in keeping with the traditional silent Southern female mystic. Elaine Lawless points out the problems inherent in traditional Western religious doctrine concerning the role of women in religious practice and the limited success women can achieve in the current religious climate. She sees "evidence that the religious master narrative—in which males are privileged by culture, society, and the church—continues to gain new strength, power, and renewed reinforcement" (61). This is certainly evident in the religious community in which Grace Shepherd and Molly Petree find themselves. Lawless does point out, however, the possibility of a shift in this master narrative—one that allows for female involvement and, indeed, female leadership and power. She sees "that the religious master narrative is being deconstructed and reimagined in positive new ways because some women are also claiming their right to all the roles and possibilities within some religions" (61). Certainly that is what Smith is attempting to illustrate in *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*.

Lawless, in her discussion of how women are working to transform the patriarchal master narrative in their religious communities, recognizes the difficulties women face within these oppressive religious communities, becoming both victim of the system and agents in their own oppression: "Even those who are oppressed by the master narrative are complicit in its survival and effectiveness" (61). Although this idea is not unique to

Lawless, it certainly comes into play in *Saving Grace*. Grace herself internalizes the patriarchal ideas that define her religious community.

In her research of Pentecostal congregations in the South, Lawless documents “the ways in which women subverted [the silencing tenets of the church which instruct women to listen and not speak] and found spaces in which to participate fully in religious contexts” (62). She cites times in which women “go into trance states, speak in tongues, pray in tongues, fall out on the floor, and have spirit-filed body spasms” (62). Although these instances do suggest participation, and we certainly see these things happen in *Saving Grace* during Grace’s childhood at the religious services at her father’s church. However, these occurrences suggest participation but not agency on the part of the women in the congregation. Speaking in tongues does not engender power or agency for these women. Like the religious community in which Grace functions, intelligible speech is reserved for men, and the power and agency speech engenders are solely the purview of the men in Grace’s life.

In the introduction to their collection of essays on women, literature, and the environment, Elaine Low and Soraya Tremayne highlight the importance of discussions such as the one I attempt in this chapter: “Late twentieth-century dissatisfaction with the inability of traditional, organized religions to provide a more harmonious way of life, has led to a search for alternative ideologies for spiritual fulfillment. The dualistic approach of Western culture in separating mind and body, male and female, spirit and matter, culture and nature, and placing the former above the latter is questioned” (1). Indeed, Lee Smith chooses to place the problems inherent in divisions such as these within

religious communities at the forefront of her narrative in *Saving Grace*. Grace, unable to find spiritual fulfillment in the patriarchal religious community into which she is born and raised, must undertake a search to find this fulfillment within herself.

Lee Smith begins her exploration of religious narratives and their effects on and usefulness to the women who populate *Saving Grace* with Grace's firm avowal of herself and her place within the religious context of her family life. In confessional fashion, Grace tells us, "My name is Florida Grace Shepherd." Smith immediately introduces us to Grace, and with her very name creates in her main character a dual citizenship—the first to Florida, a place characterized by its exoticism, commerciality, and sometimes sensual irreverence. The second narrative to which Grace belongs is firmly set in the spiritual world. Her name, "Grace," reveals the importance Smith places on Grace's religious quest for fulfillment. Indeed, throughout the entire novel, Grace searches for that which she is named—the grace of the Spirit. And Smith tells her readers right up front that this quest will be difficult for Grace, who insists she is not like her mother, whom she characterizes as "lovely as the day is long, in spirit as well as flesh" (3). Grace tells us, "I am and always have been contentious and ornery, full of fear and doubt in a family of believers" (3).

From the beginning of the novel Grace reveals her separateness from her religious community and asserts her disdain for the role she is meant to play—that of the meek and faithful female parishioner in the image of her mother, Fannie. It is also in this first paragraph that Smith contrasts the two main images of female spirituality within this novel. On the one hand we are introduced to Fannie, Grace's showgirl-turned-preacher's

wife mother, the cheerful, devout, blindly faithful and obedient Holiness woman; on the other hand, Grace herself stands opposed to these cultural and spiritual definitions of a religious woman. Thus, immediately Smith introduces the primary tension in the novel and the representatives of each side of the internal conflict that Grace battles for nearly the entire novel. Critic Conrad Ostwalt claims that Smith creates an air of otherness in her characterization of churches and religious communities such as the one in which Grace is raised and for which her father preaches: “More often than not, when Smith portrays traditional Appalachian churches, they appear exotic, unrestrained, and oddly peculiar in terms of the relationship to other more socially acceptable religious faiths” (100). While it is true that the religious communities that populate *Saving Grace* are certainly different and set apart from “normal” Christian denominations, Smith engenders in these characters a humanity and a religious faithfulness that goes against Ostwalt’s descriptions of them.

Grace immediately distances herself from the faith of her father and mother as she describes her feelings about Jesus: “I loved Daddy and Mama but I did not love Jesus. And I actually hated Him when He made us take up traveling in His name, living with strangers and in tents and old school buses and what have you” (4). For Grace, her problem with the religious tenets of her spiritual community starts early in her childhood, and although these kinds of comments are not surprising from a child, the ideas concerning the lack of agency and individual will implicit in her statements belie Grace’s basic and fundamental problems with her religious community that stay with her long after these childish comments into her adulthood.

Virgil Shepherd, Grace's father and self-proclaimed preacher and serpent handler, further delineates those problems Grace has with her religious community as he introduces himself to the Duty family who come to help them when their car breaks down in the beginning of the novel. Virgil tells Carlton Duty, "I preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is written in His Holy Bible, amen, and not in no other place, and I am out here on the road follering His divine plan . . . I will do what he tells me to do, I will go where He tells me to go, and stop where He tells me to stop" (8). Grace's father preaches a spirituality characterized by moments of religious ecstasy that allow him and many of the members of his Jesus Name church to speak in tongues, handle snakes, and, like her mother, handle hot coals. Grace despises all of these things because they require a loss of control she is not prepared to give up to God or anyone else. Underlying this typical religious idea is a sense of helplessness and lack of agency that Grace refuses to accept.

It is this idea that silences Grace for most of the novel and informs her sense of good and evil; she does not like this silencing aspect of the Holiness narrative and understands that this dislike she harbors has damned her: "I worried that the Devil might really be in me after all, growing like a baby inside of me until I got so big that everyone could see, and everyone would know my awful secret" (4). As a child (and for most of her adult life) Grace carries with her these notions of good and evil, only to come to the end of the novel having rejected both this dualistic idea of spirituality as well as the cloak of silence that it engenders. Grace starts out silenced by her religious community, struggling for a way to speak, to tell her own story, to decide her own story and spiritual narrative. Many people, mainly the men in her life, silence her on many levels. But she

fighters for her own language, her own speech, which represents for Grace her own assertion of independence.

Her father silenced her mother for years; although she spoke in tongues and handled fire when moved by the Spirit at prayer meetings and revivals, her individuality was subsumed by Virgil's loud and unabashed charisma. She is overshadowed and silenced by Virgil's infidelities and lapses in faith. She silences herself in the end with her own suicide. Ironically, when Grace loses her mother's voice in her life, she struggles all the more to release her own voice and agency. And as Doyle suggests, "If her mother Fannie was silenced by her marriage and religion, Gracie's spiritual gift of tongues and of 'discernment,' her ability to see into people and the future, was apparently released by her mother's corpse" and now "Gracie means to tell the whole story, the whole truth" (279).

She tells us she will not be silenced any more: "For I mean to tell my story, and I mean to tell the truth. I am a believer in the Word, and I am not going to flinch from telling it" (4). The Word she refers to suggests not the traditional religious implications of "Word;" instead, it becomes the Words of her life, her own refusal to be silent and uninvolved in her own spiritual journey. From the beginning of the novel we see Grace shrugging off the oppressive religious tenets with which she has been raised, searching for another spiritual path. Smith uses this main image of silence and voice to illustrate Grace's search for spiritual fulfillment—the silencing tendencies of traditional religious narrative and the freeing power Grace finds in Nature and the natural surroundings of her childhood home. It is not until the end of the novel that Grace taps into the healing

power of nature and its potential for spiritual fulfillment. Most of the novel sees Grace reacting to and rebelling against the oppressive religious tenets she has internalized. This worldview affects Grace in all of her relationships, especially those she has with men, both romantic and familial (and sometimes both simultaneously, as with her relationship with Lamar, her half-brother).

Smith divides *Saving Grace* into five sections, each detailing important milestones in Grace's spiritual development. Each also details her relationships with the men in her life. Each of these men become for Grace representative of the powerlessness and lack of agency she has learned from her religious community. Linda Byrd-Cook recognizes the oppression of female agency within Grace's religious culture, accounting both for Grace's victimization and silencing by her religion, as well as her rebellion from that same religious atmosphere, a rebellion that starts as a child and continues through to the end of the novel. Byrd-Cook writes: "Grace's sense of alienation from her father's God is largely due to the patriarchal 'father tongue' of her culture and her family's Holiness religion in particular" (99). And while Smith gives her readers a look at the Pentecostal Holiness sect of Christianity as one of fervent faith and surprising humanity, she also points out its negative effects on feminine agency and individuality.

Grace's experience illustrates this point. The men in her life illustrate the power of the spoken word, the agency it engenders in those that are allowed to use it, and the persuasive power of voice over herself and the women around her. Grace, on the other hand, does not feel she has the power to speak "in the language reserved for males" (Byrd-Cook 99). Grace has internalized these strictures placed upon her by the

patriarchal ideals of the Holiness culture, causing her to remain silenced, even though she goes through periods of rebellion, both vocally and sexually. Grace searches for the spiritual fulfillment of her father all of her life, yet searching for a Jesus unlike that of her father's faith. She frequently harbors resistance to and even animosity for the Jesus of her father's faith, hating his ability to take her father away from his family and her fear for her mother as she is moved by Jesus to handle the coals that scare Grace so badly.

Ironically, all of the men in her life seem to represent this search for Jesus at different times in her life. They fit the metaphorical representation of Jesus, yet all fall short of providing the spiritual fulfillment that the Jesus of Judeo-Christian tradition is meant to supply to his followers. Her father is her first Jesus figure, and she frequently describes him as looking like Jesus, arms outstretched as if on the cross, bathed in light from the moon that creates a halo around him; Lamar is her father's son, just as Jesus is God's son; Travis Word, his surname recalling Jesus's calling as a preacher, is a carpenter, just as Jesus was; she even describes Randy Newhouse's appearance as a cross between "Jesus and Kris Kristofferson" (200). None of these Jesus figures provide salvation for Grace, however. It is only the mother figure that calls her forth into new spiritual enlightenment at the end of the novel. In a drastic revision of the patriarchal savior narrative, Grace finds fulfillment in the decidedly gynocentric Mother goddess, provided by both the memory of her own mother and the feminine divinity of nature. It is not until the end of the novel when she comes back to Scrabble Creek alone that she is able to find true spiritual fulfillment within herself and through the life-affirming baptism of Scrabble Creek and the geography of her childhood home. Each of her relationships

with the men in her life highlights her growing disconnection with nature and spiritual fulfillment she finds in it.

The first section of the novel details Grace's relationships with her father and her half-brother Lamar, who appears one day at their doorstep and confirms what Grace already suspects: that her father, instead of being the devout religious leader of both their family and of their community, has had relationships with several women, including Lamar's mother, whom Virgil left for Grace's mother. Grace is instantly attracted to Lamar, and it is with Lamar that Grace first experiences the empowering self-awareness that comes with sexual awakening. Grace likes the way she feels when she is with Lamar; sex connects her more fully with her self, and it is through these sexual encounters that Grace first experiences the spiritual fulfillment found in nature. Her natural tendencies to enjoy her body and the sensual pleasures it provides are both freeing to Grace and cause her great anguish: "I was swept along, carried away in the general fever of that night. I did not feel I was going wrong either, even then. I did not think about that. I did not think at all" (106). Lamar becomes for Grace the polar opposite of her father, a catalyst for her own independence and affirmation of self. It is not until Lamar abandons Grace and the rest of her family after her mother's suicide that Grace sees Lamar as more akin to her father than she previously imagined. His betrayal and abandonment foreshadow Virgil's abandonment later in the novel.

Before Lamar's eventual betrayal, Grace lets go of her notions of sin and guilt during her encounters with Lamar. Grace connects her feelings about Lamar with the natural world as well, as many of their sexual encounters happen outside in the environs

of Scrabble Creek. In her relationship with her half brother Lamar, Grace attempts to find her own spiritual fulfillment, allowing him access to her sexuality and to the geography of nature around her house at Scrabble creek. The caves and springs that mark their meeting places represent the feminine divine found in Nature, and it is here that Grace revels in the natural baptism provided by the water in which she and Lamar swim. It is here that she feels least confined and closest to spiritual salvation, commenting that here in the water (where women typically could not go since Holiness women were not allowed to swim) she felt as if she and Lamar “were both boys together” (85). As positive as this seems, the words Grace uses to describe this experience, the fact that she sees herself as a boy, suggests that Grace still buys into the patriarchal power structure, understanding that males wield power and freedom and agency, not women.

And it is only when she connects to nature by herself, without the presence of the male forces in her life, that she ultimately taps into the divinity found within her. She goes to Chimney Rock to be alone; this becomes her most fulfilling spiritual encounter until the end of the novel—and it happens when she is away from the oppressive forces of her father’s religion. During her foray to Chimney Rock, she connects with the female divinity inspired by “mother” nature and asserts her own feminine agency by stripping herself naked to the waist and carving her name in the rocks. Both actions represent Grace’s need for feminine power, represented by her bare breasts and by her assertion of her own name. She describes Chimney rock as “two huge boulders perched on top of a cliff, miles and miles of nothing but sky and mountains, where the wind always blows” (56). The physical layout of the land recalls the physical female body, and the wind gives

grace both inspiration and agency, so much so that she writes her name on the rocks, giving herself agency and reiterating her own individuality outside of the oppressive religious environment in which she is living. Although she goes up to the Rock looking for a sign from Jesus, she finds instead inspiration and a sense of freedom in Nature and the female divinity within herself, inspired by Nature.

Bringing Lamar into the spiritual landscape where she finds so much satisfaction complicates her sense of spiritual fulfillment found when she is alone on Chimney Rock. Her denial of the feminine power brought on by nature foreshadows the failure of her relationship with Lamar just as the rest of her relationships with the men in her life deny her ultimate salvation. It is only when she looks within herself and accesses her own feminine divinity does Grace get closest to spiritual fulfillment and salvation. She says, “at no time during that spring did I ever feel like I was a sinner girl” (84). Indeed, she most closely associates sex with Lamar to the feelings she has when she experiences the self-affirming power of the natural world by herself: “I remember laying there in the backseat of Daddy’s car . . . and how I looked past Lamar’s dark head to the tops of the trees, green and feathery against the enormous black night which waited there” (106).

Jacqueline Doyle points out that Grace is confused by the ideas of sin and redemption espoused by her religious community. These ideas are often in direct contrast to her own feelings concerning the correctness or incorrectness of her actions. Even throughout her rebellious thoughts against Jesus, her sexual awakening with Lamar, and her infidelity with Randy Newhouse while married to Travis, “Gracie never clearly

situates herself within the vocabulary of a religious tradition that excludes women as sinful, fleshly, and all too natural” (Doyle 278). And even though Grace seems to judge herself according to the ideas of goodness and evil inherent in her religious community, she never totally buys into those ideas. As Doyle suggests, “even as she seems to move toward some final judgment on herself and her experiences . . . she never clearly arrives there” (278).

The first section of the novel shows both Grace’s internalization of and rejection of the religious community of the Jesus Name church as well as her growing connection with nature and the land around Scrabble Creek. This section is punctuated with scenes of religious miracles and moments of religious ecstasy—her father’s reviving of a dead little girl, serpent handling by both her father and other members of the church congregation, even her own religious prophesying—all of which Grace rejects. These scenes are counterbalanced by ones in which Grace feels mostly closely connected with a sense of the divine; these scenes find Grace experiencing the spiritual ecstasy of the natural world. For example, she gets off the school bus one day and sees a stand of dogwood trees in full bloom. She is overcome by a sense of spiritual ecstasy: “Suddenly I saw them, all in bloom, white and pink, like I was seeing them for the first time, or like they were the first dogwood trees in the whole world. I dropped my books in the road and ran over there to stand in the middle of them, so that wherever I looked, I couldn’t see anything except blossoms, and then I was the blossoms, all blossom—me, Gracie. I drew in great sweet breaths and then I was crying” (77). Unlike the religious conversions and anointing Grace has witnessed at church revivals and meetings, this experience reads

like a religious baptism. Grace becomes one with nature, and she can breath and see for the first time, without the hindrances of her traditional religious community.

This scene contrasts most poignantly with one in which Grace supposedly has a religious experience while she is sleeping after a revival at the Jesus Name church. Carlton tells her when she awakens that she was “praising God and prophesying” in her sleep. Although she denies it, Carlton tells her, “Sissy, we don’t always have a choice in these things” (107). She responds, “I was trying to tell Carlton that I did not want to be chosen or loved either one. I did not want to be visited by Jesus in the night. I did not want to be visited by Jesus at all, and was terrified that he might return. ‘Don’t come back,’ I whispered to Him that morning in the washroom at Jesus Name Church. ‘Just leave me alone,’ I prayed” (107). Grace rejects the religious moments of ecstasy on which her father and the congregation of Jesus Name Church place so much importance.

It is the little baptisms she receives out in nature that mean the most to Grace, although she loses touch with this part of her spiritual growth after leaves Scrabble Creek with her father. The impetus for her departure comes when her mother commits suicide. Grace attributes her death to the fact that Fannie was silenced for her entire life by her father and by her Holiness faith, one which Grace aptly characterizes, “the Holiness girl or woman does not have a voice . . . she can handle and she can preach, but she can’t decide things” (109). Fannie discovers Virgil’s infidelities and retaliates by having an affair with Lamar. According to Grace, Fannie killed herself because of her own inability to accept her sin and forgive herself for it. This idea highlights both Fannie’s and Grace’s own internalization of the patriarchal ideas concerning the sin of adultery. While

the Holiness tenets damn Fannie for her infidelity (and Grace as well, when she damns herself for her own infidelities with Lamar and Randy), they also make no room for female sexuality and expression. Both women succumb to this appropriation of their sexuality and sexual expression by their religious ideals. Fannie, however, lacks the Grace's strength to negotiate a spiritual path that leads to an acceptance of her sexuality and the feminine divinity within herself. Fannie's suicide represents her ultimate acceptance of the patriarchal system that has denied her agency since her marriage to Virgil.

Grace's eventual rejection of nature and her spiritual fulfillment found in her home is foreshadowed as Grace discovers her mother's dangling body in the barn: "It seemed to me like months since we had left here for the Homecoming, yet it had been only the day before. The water of Scrabble Creek made a bitter taste in my mouth" (111). She begins a descent away from nature and from the spiritual fulfillment that she feels during her years at Scrabble Creek. Joan Wylie Hall writes of Grace's separation from and ultimate return to the Mother figure which symbolizes her happiest and best days as a child at Scrabble Creek. Emphasizing the epigraph of *Saving Grace*, taken from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, that suggests all of our journeys culminate back where we started, Hall charts Grace's departure from and eventual return to her one true home, that of Scrabble Creek. Her comparison of Grace to her mother is apropos, as Grace finds herself reluctantly comparing herself to her mother, yet refusing to fall into the same trap of depression, acceptance, and defeat. She leaves Scrabble Creek with her father after the death of her mother and wanders for the rest of the novel, looking for the same kind of

spiritual reward she found at Scrabble Creek. Grace turns away from the home that provides her with much more spiritual awareness than does her religious faith.

The next two sections of the novel chart Grace's course with her father as they go from town to town looking for a preaching gig. She calls herself "an instrument of Daddy, the way he was an instrument of God. I understood this and bore it without complaint. I felt like it was my due in some way, my duty. This had to do with Lamar" (121). Her sense of guilt and sin comes full circle in these sections as she internalizes the repressive ideas of her father's Holiness religion, blaming herself for her "sinful" relationship with her half-brother. As her father became more and more obstinate and volatile, Grace became more repressed and reserved. Smith characterizes Grace's inability to find peace within herself in terms of nature, only here those images are not life-affirming; instead they highlight Grace's separation from the spiritual home she has left behind: "I often dreamed that I was being swept along down a great flooded river, and I'd feel that it was really true even when I woke up, like the earth was moving, turning to water beneath my feet" (138). These images conjure not the empowering freedom and self-awareness Grace finds at Scrabble Creek but the drowning and oppressive power of Virgil's influence on Grace's spiritual health and religious views.

When Virgil runs off with Carlean Combs, a "crazy" woman from the Hi-Way Tabernacle, one of the only places in their travels that still accepts Virgil's serpent-handling and ecstatic methods of preaching, Carlean locks Grace in their bathroom. This is Grace's lowest point in these sections, as her father and his oppressive lifestyle both physically and emotionally trap her. As she prays to God to save her, it is not the God of

Virgil Shepherd that comforts her; indeed, it is the “Sound of the rain” on the metal roof and visions of nature that become saving graces for her: “I let Him comfort me with the sound of the rain. I closed my eyes and let go of everything until I was swimming free, beyond the aquarium, in and out of undersea caverns through shafts of light that pierced the beautiful blue water of the sea” (148). Once again Grace calls on the natural world to provide her with relief from her situation, albeit in this case it is one of fantasy.

Travis Word, her future husband, saves Grace from that trailer and becomes one of the men in her life that she thinks will be a path to her salvation and spiritual fulfillment. He is the preacher at Hi-Way Tabernacle, and it is significant that Grace chooses him as her savior in this section of the novel. She immediately sees him differently than before: not like “a man from a different time,” but as a savior. She sees him “standing on the steps of . . . the trailer with the dark night behind him and the light from the open door shining on his pale concerned face” (155-6). Once again Grace looks somewhere other than herself for her salvation; she looks to a man and, upon finding one, reshapes her image of him to fit the mold of savior for her.

Byrd-Cook also points out Grace’s internalization of the masculine power of religion through her relationships with different men. Once again she fails to recognize that fulfillment comes from within herself and her specific femininity, assuming that her lack of spiritual fulfillment can be solved by getting a man and entering into a relationship with a man. Byrd-Cook writes: “While talking to Travis, she feels the ‘soft, cool breeze blow on her neck,’ but instead of seeing this as evidence of inner divine strength and power, she mistakes this sensation for a sign that she needs a man, a

replacement for her father” (102). She reveals to Travis her own feminine power by showing him her breasts by the river where they are picnicking. Mirroring her show of power and agency on Chimney Rock through the baring of her breast, she unwittingly reveals to Travis there by the river her own agency in spiritual fulfillment. However, she does not recognize the divine power of her own femininity at this point, because she reveals herself to him knowing that his patriarchal religious ideals would force him to marry her now that he has seen her naked and touched her body. She uses her femininity and female power to catch a man, not to establish herself as the spring of her own salvation. After she takes his hand and brings it to her breast, she tells him, “I guess you’ll just have to marry me now” (174). It is significant that Smith allows Grace the agency and feminine power engendered by that act to further enslave her in a religious system that refuses to recognize and celebrate that kind of individual action.

As Travis’s sisters prepare her for the wedding, Grace again becomes angry at even the smallest instance of her powerlessness in her situation. As the spinster sisters bring her a veil for her wedding, she says, “my first reaction was disappointment that I had not gotten to go along to Valleydale with Helen and Minnie” (176). And she is upset when the baker inscribes her wedding cake with “Glory to God Amen” instead of “Travis and Gracie in Love” (181). It is not God who was the mastermind behind her wedding, and Grace’s growing impatience with her own overlooked agency begins to show. Indeed, she describes the entire process and her waning autonomy in it in terms that foreshadow her future with Travis: “I smiled at myself in the wavy mirror, turning this way and that. I felt like a paper doll myself, all dressed up by Travis’s sisters” (177).

Even Smith's use of the passive voice here suggests that Grace, although she seems happy, she is not in control of her own life. She is drifting farther away from the life-giving forces she found in the waters of Scrabble Creek and the mountains beside her childhood home.

The freedom and agency Grace felt during and after her sexual experiences with Lamar are all but stripped from her in her relationship with Travis. After their wedding night, "the most awful change came over Travis Word" (188). While she basked in the experience of their lovemaking, Travis insisted on praying for forgiveness for their lustful souls. After his prayer session, during which she thought "she would freeze to death down there on the floor while he did it," he falls immediately asleep. Grace, however, exhilarated by her sexuality, finds comfort again in the natural world, albeit the one far removed from Scrabble Creek: "I got up and put on my coat and my shoes, and went out to stand on the balcony in the chilly air. The Holiday Inn was on a hill, so that I could look down upon the highway and beyond it, at the whole city of Knoxville spread out like a big sea of twinkling lights" (188). Her exhilaration is again connected intimately with a connection to the natural world, and Grace feels "strung as tight as a guy wire" until she can make that body/soul/nature connection once again. In fact, her sexual experiences with Travis over the course of their marriage do not seem to be between two people, just between Travis and the Lord. Grave describes her sex life with Travis in just those terms: "I could count on my fingers the number of times Travis and I actually did it in any given month—or to be accurate, the number of times he *did it to me*. For he did not like me to move much, or say anything, while he was doing it. And when he was

through, he would fling himself down on his knees, praying in anguish to be cleansed” (197). Even the language she uses to describe the encounters do not place her as the subject, just as the object. She has no real agency in or connection to her own sexual experiences with her husband.

After the birth of her two children, Grace continues to feel powerless and not in control of her own life: “Life seemed to pass like a big slow river. For the most part, I was content to float along, or paddle in the shallows with my baby girls, looking out across its broad mysterious expanse” (195). Again the natural images here seem to suggest Grace’s lack of agency, precisely due to her lack of connection with the real rivers and mountains of nature. Her marriage to Travis gets darker and darker for Grace, culminating in the loss of the son, born prematurely. This image is significant on two levels: it signifies the end of Graver’s relationship with Travis as well as the oppressive sterility of her relationship with Travis. She is barren of any real agency or spiritual fulfillment even as she lives among the religious leaders of her community. Her marriage to Travis highlights the denial of her female agency and individuality; sex becomes shameful for Travis, and he projects this onto Grace as well. Even as she revels in her sexual awakening, Travis squelches this instinct in Grace. She again goes searching for a savior and thinks she finds it in her affair with the painter Randy Newhouse.

Grace claims with a degree of pride, “And nothing would have happened if it hadn’t of been for me. I did it, pure and simple. It was all my own doing, and all my own fault” (217). She feels pride despite her previous comment upholding her chastity and prudence due to her standing in her religious community: “I was the preacher’s wife,

after all” (217). Although Grace understands the position she holds and attempts to internalize the oppressive nature of this role, she again cannot contain her own desire for individual choice and agency in her life. She chooses to have an affair with Randy and chooses to leave Travis and her girls when the affair is brought to light. Even as she seems to struggle with her decision to meet Randy at a hotel for their first sexual encounter, she understands that she has already decided to go through with it. Smith again connects Grace’s sexual experiences with natural forces and her decisions with this connection instead of to religious leanings: “I had stood in the side yard in the cold blowing wind the night before and asked Jesus out loud to help me, to give me some sign not to go over there, but He didn’t do a thing. Nothing. The wind kept on blowing” (222). She listens not to the repressive voice of the Jesus that leads the rest of her religious community; in fact He is silent to Grace. She listens to the wind, the representative of the nature, her true self, leading her to act, even if the act itself tears her world apart.

Byrd-Cook suggests that Grace “[s]ubconsciously acknowledges the female deity in her dual representation of motherhood and sexuality since Grace admits to a power beyond herself . . . which impels her to follow her instincts” and find self-expression outside of her marriage to Travis through sex. However, she again looks for this salvation outside herself, searching instead for another substitute for her father and for Travis in the form of Randy Newhouse. Instead of “standing up and walking out into the universe on her own, grace, starved for physical passion, once more mistakes the ‘electric shock’ Randy arouses in her body for the passion of salvation” (Byrd-Cook 103).

Through Grace's sexual affair with Randy and her subsequent abandonment of her children, Smith illustrates the need for a woman in a religious community like Grace's to assert her sexual agency. However, she also acknowledges the complex problems that arise when women choose to seek this individual spiritual fulfillment. Although many people in Grace's community find her behavior—both her affair and her abandonment of her family—disgraceful, the reader sees this refusal to adhere to the repressive tenets of her religious community as necessary for Grace's ultimate salvation. Unfortunately Grace must search in vain once more for this salvation through the wrong vehicle—Randy Newhouse.

After she leaves Travis for Randy, Grace reaches her lowest point, a point where she is least connected to the natural forces that give her guidance and fulfillment; it is significant that she is also farthest away geographically from the life-giving powers of her childhood home. She moves into Randy's apartment, ironically named Creekside Green Apartments. Smith again connects Grace's geographic location with her mental and spiritual location. At this point in the novel, as Grace is most removed from any true spiritual connection with the divine she once glimpsed at Chimney Rock, her home is one devoid of connection to the natural world as well: "There was no creek at Creekside Green, nothing green either. Nothing but cheap apartments and concrete. Somebody told me that there used to be a creek but they had paved it over to build the apartments, and then they named the apartments for it" (234).

Grace feels this loss poignantly, claiming that she "missed the country, too, I missed sitting out under that shade tree in the side yard, or in the glider on the front porch

looking across the mountains” (234). Even in her life with Travis she found pleasure and a sense of fulfillment and peace when she connects with the natural world, however brief those moments are. With Randy, there is only a sham of these feelings, as the story of the genesis of the apartment complex reveals. After she discovers that Randy has not been faithful to her and that her life with him is indeed the sham she suspected it was, she begins her journey that ultimately leads her back home to Scrabble Creek.

One of the most poignant and spiritually revealing scenes of the novel comes during this section of the novel, as Grace searches for salvation. As she passes through Gatlinburg, she comes across Uncle Slidell’s Christian Fun Golf, a now defunct miniature golf course. She hears a baby’s cry and follows it through the course, which is punctuated by “the Love Tour,” each hole created in the fashion of an important Bible story. She follows the baby’s voice to the manger at Hole Number Ten, The First Christmas.” The baby is a figment of Grace’s imagination, and she finds out from the owner of a nearby diner that “There ain’t no Uncle Slidell” (249). It is apropos that the Christianity that Grace rebels against nearly all her life has been reduced to a commercial façade, devoid of any real meaning or truth. For Grace, the snowy night and the truth of Uncle Slidell’s fiction opens her eyes to the true path to her own salvation: “I do not remember the drive back onto the interstate, or the longer drive across the snowy mountains as I headed back toward home” (249). Her experience at the putt-putt course reflects her own searches for salvation and spiritual fulfillment—that they have been false salvations, at the same time self-serving and self-repressing.

Grace returns to Scrabble Creek, stocking up on supplies for her visit at the Food Lion that now sits where the Jesus Name Church once sat. In the store she is reunited with an old parishioner of her father's who asks her to come back to church to worship. Although she backs away, rejecting this suggestion, he tells her, "it's the same old church. It's the same old God. There ain't no other way" (266). She resists, thinking, "I thought about the other ways I had tried—living a lie with Travis, worshipping flesh and the things of the world with Randy Newhouse. Yet I resisted" (266). She realizes that she must try the one way she has not tried yet—the one on her own terms, at the place where she's most connected to nature and the natural world.

At the end of the novel, Grace accesses the female goddess of Nature and place within herself as she returns to Scrabble Creek and the geography of her childhood. She again bares her body as representative of power as she walks naked through her old home. She drinks from Scrabble Creek, reflecting and internal baptism into the spiritual realm of feminine divinity. Instead of submersing herself in the creek, which reflects the patriarchal subsumation of self within religion, she ingests the creek water. This is the most important representation of the different spiritual path Grace needs for salvation. She brings the feminine goddess of nature into herself, baptizing herself from within, It is here that Grace finds salvation within herself and the water from Scrabble Creek engenders this divinity within her own body. Finally grace can heed the call of her mother—both her biological mother, whom she hears calling her back to spirituality, as well as Mother Nature, the divine goddess both within grace and all around her. Byrd-Cook highlights this idea as well: "Alone, 'unsaved' in the traditional Christian sense,

Grace has reclaimed the female deity in an ecstatic experience and found within herself the source and strength of the divine” (110).

Unlike her father and Travis, whose path they contend God had illuminated to them and around which they ordered their pasts and futures, Grace cannot find her path, nor can she discern God’s hand in her life, giving it meaning and purpose. This, Grace comes to learn, is due to the fact that the God that orders Travis and Virgil’s paths is one that does not allow for Grace’s latent need for individual choice and feminine agency. Doyle suggests that “Gracie’s own ‘testimony’ is neither fixed in meaning nor well rehearsed. . . . Even as she struggles out of her wilderness of doubt, truths for Gracie emerge in the ongoing act of telling her story as she experienced it—a saving testimony, rather than a set-piece testimony of the saved” (276 – 7). The act of telling rather than being told is seminal for Grace—it suggests an agency that has been denied her for nearly all of her life, not least of all by her own sense of self and of sense of spiritual responsibility and governance.

The last scene of the novel shows Grace in the throes of true spiritual ecstasy, a dream sequence in which her mother beckons her back to church. At the end of the novel when Grace’s mother comes to her in a dream, it is the feminine divine calling her to a new religious experience, into a new religious narrative: “The visionary, liminal state Gracie wakes to is marked by the maternal sacred” (Doyle 280). She, like her mother, handles the hot coals from the stove heating the abandoned house of her youth. Grace seems to subconsciously understand the divine power and importance found in her mother’s voice, calling her mother “ a real Saint” and remembering her mother’s ability

to calm, sooth, heal, and entertain Grace and her siblings all through her childhood. However, she equates authority with her father's voice, and subsequently with Lamar's, Travis's, and Randy Newhouse's. It is not until the end of the novel that she releases her previously ingrained ideas about male power and agency and embraces both her Mother's divine power to save and her own ability to save herself. She hears her mother's voice calling her to embrace her own female divinity at the end of the novel. This "mother" represents not only her own mother, whose memory becomes the catalyst for Grace's ultimate salvation, but also Mother Nature, the ethereal spirit found within the actual land grace comes back to—Scrabble Creek, the mountains surrounding her childhood home, and the house in which she began her journey toward salvation.

Grace fully connects with the land around her, allowing her spiritual conversion and baptism: "I stop for one last time to kneel by the icy rushing waters of Scrabble Creek. The sweetest sound I ever heard, it has stayed in my head all these years. I drink to my heart's content" (272). This figurative baptism in the waters of Scrabble Creek, the internal rebirth brought about by Graces' connection to the Earthly Mother, the divine feminine, Grace is freed from her previous phalocentric religious narrative and silence. At the beginning of the novel, Grace identifies herself as Florida Grace Shepherd, eleventh child of Virgil Shepherd. By the end of the novel, she identifies herself as simply Florida Grace, without any of the married surnames she takes throughout the novel. The obvious omission of Shepherd, Word, or Newhouse from her name underscores Grace's newfound independence; she can now walk freely back to church. Doyle situates Grace's newfound voice and her subsequent naming of herself and

retelling of her story within the scope of the reclamation of all the lost female voices within religious narratives that attempt to silence them: “Self-naming and the achievement of narrative voice function not only as individual self-definition but as communal recovery of lost female voices and possibilities” (284). Indeed, Smith revises the tradition of silenced women, both in religious contexts and in literary contexts, giving voice to both grace and the women she represents as well as women writers who have been silenced throughout history.

As Grace gets into her car, presumably heading for church as the bells ring in another Sunday, Grace recalls “the white sweep of snowy ground where me and Billie Jean made angels in the snow” (273). By reconnecting with the land that brought her so much spiritual fulfillment, Grace becomes an apostle of the divine, an “angel” in the snow. Linda Byrd-Cook puts forth the idea that Smith attempts to solve the problem of the disappearing feminine presence in Western religion in *Saving Grace*. She cites Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s work on this issue, *The Myth of the Goddess*, which argues that contemporary religious culture denies a “feminine dimension in the collective image of the divine” and erases any chance to see the feminine experience “as a sacred entity” (660). Smith uses Grace’s journey toward spiritual fulfillment as an illustration of successful reintegration of these ideas into religious experience, at least for Grace personally. According to Byrd-Cook, Grace “achieve[s] reconciliation by rediscovering and reclaiming the power of female divinity in the prehistoric great Mother Goddess” (97). Certainly Grace succeeds in redefining her own religious experience and finds a path to belief that allows her agency and individuality. Instead of finding religious

fulfillment through the men in her life, Grace comes to identify divinity within her own female body and mind, her own distinctly female self.

Hall comments, “At Scrabble Creek, Florida Grace Shepherd ‘knows’ herself because mother and daughter, past and present, heaven and earth are miraculously united” (96). This romantic view of the end of the novel is only half-correct; Hall neglects to emphasize the importance of Grace’s own agency in her happy ending. It is not miraculous in that Grace is led to this point by something other than her own agency; rather, Grace invokes her own spiritual goddess intimately connected with the Mother Nature of Scrabble Creek, and it is this recognition that engenders her success and spiritual fulfillment. The mother she conjures at the end of the novel looks like her biological mother, certainly; Grace recalls her mother’s voice, even mirrors her mother’s actions of handling the hot coals in the stove that worms the now dilapidated home.

But it is ultimately the great Mother of the natural world, specifically that of Scrabble Creek, the snow falling around grace as she makes her way to church, that Grace taps into for her own spiritual fulfillment. Jacqueline Doyle also addresses Grace’s redemption in the novel, recognizing the difference in Grace’s ultimate spiritual narrative and the traditional one in which she grew up: “Although her story takes shape within the traditions of Christian allegory, Christian autobiography, and the oral testimonies of the Southern church, she unsettles all of those genres in the indeterminacy of her perspective and irresolution of her conclusion. The spiritual threshold Gracie crosses when she leaves home for the second time is ambiguous, an open door to the unknown” (275). As much as this is literally true in the sense that Smith does not tell the reader where Grace is

going when she walks from the house at Scrabble Creek, her perspective is decidedly determined. She acts now, finally at the end of her journey, of her own accord, in her own terms, led not by her ideas of what the men in her life want her to be but by the agency and individuality found within herself through the conduits of both the memory of her own mother and her greater Mother found in the natural surroundings of Scrabble Creek. And while the reader does not know specifically where Grace is going, there is distinct resolution in her conclusion—wherever she goes (and presumably she is heeding the church bells in the distance and going to meeting), she does so with a resolution grounded in her own decision-making agency and individual choice.

Doyle aptly points out, however, that Grace comes to reject the ideology of her father's Pentecostal religious narrative that silences women and embraces instead "a radically revised Christian spirituality that is open-ended, indeterminate, mysterious, and woman-centered" (275). Ultimately it is her baptism through nature at the end of the novel, her readjustment of the Christian ideals in which she grew up and formulated the basis for many of her decisions throughout the novel, that "authorizes Gracie's reclamation of the Word and telling of her own story (276). Debra Druesedow describes Grace's story as inextricable linked to place; indeed, her story is one she cannot tell without returning to the place where her journey began. Druesedow suggests, "Place in the novel is more than a notion of land, more than where one grew up; it also serves as a catalyst of memory, a process through which Grace evolves spiritually" (72). It is this spiritual growth that marks the most important transformation for Grace. She moves from a position of silence within her own spiritual narrative to the reclaimed and

thoroughly feminine voice of a new religious story. This story is one that allows Grace her own agency, her own individuality, something she has been denied nearly all her life.

I contend, however, that the spiritual journey Grace makes during the course of the novel is complicated however, by her actions at the end of the novel. In leaving Scrabble Creek for the valley below and presumably the church that she hears calling her home, Grace re-enters the slippery slope of organized religion. Although we can hope that she will find a religious community that does not stifle her creativity, her agency, and her spiritual fulfillment, we are left with a nagging feeling that she is returning to the first place that told her none of these things could truly be hers. For Grace, the internal war between the repressive religion of her father's Jesus Name Church and the more elemental spiritual connection she found on Chimney Rock as a girl is never fully reconciled. As Ostwald suggests, "The two types of religious consciousness create a paradox—a conflict between the transcendent and the this-worldly—a paradox that rarely allows Smith's characters to fully overcome their marginalization" (108).

This is especially evident at the end of the novel as Grace receives her true baptism in the waters of Scrabble Creek, fully accepting the spiritual fulfillment brought about by her return to and acceptance of the elemental spiritual landscape of her childhood. She is called by her Mother—not just the spirit of her biological mother but also by her Mother Earth, the natural, elemental spirit found in the mountains around her—but as she walks from her childhood home on that cold Sunday, she apparently is returning to the ringing bells of the church calling her back to Meeting. This complicates the apparent spiritual revolution Grace follows over the course of the novel; indeed, by

returning the spiritual landscape of her late father's old church, she invites the same repression and loss of agency she felt at the beginning of her story and throughout most of the novel.

Thus, although Smith writes in *Saving Grace* a poignant and touching story of one woman's quest for spiritual fulfillment, she only allows Grace to go so far on that quest. Smith points out through this questionable ending that it is harder than simply reconnecting to one's past that allows true spiritual fulfillment. Ostwalt characterizes the traditional religious atmosphere in which Grace is raised "restrictive" and those who are active in it "hypocritical and repressed" (98). Ostwalt goes on to write, "traditional religion appears as mostly irrelevant and ineffectual in an Appalachia in the midst of change, modernization, and secularization" (98). While this is certainly true for Grace, she still searches for and seems determined to find a spiritual home. She does not buy into the secularization of modern Appalachia, even as she rejects the antiquated and morally irrelevant tenets of the Pentecostal religion her father so ardently and passionately preaches. It takes nearly the length of the entire novel for Grace to realize this. She is hindered in her acceptance of the spiritual fulfillment found in nature and the land of her youth because she internalizes the ideas of sin, guilt, and absolution espoused by her traditional religious narrative. And the end of the novel is further complicated by her re-entry into the religious community that repressed her nearly all her life.

In her novel, *On Agate Hill*, however, Smith creates a character in Molly Petree who finds a way to go farther than Grace could in allowing nature to fully represent her spiritual narrative. Like Grace, she negotiates the tensions between the traditional

religious narrative written for her by her family and community and the search for a spiritual narrative of her own, one that celebrates her femininity and individualism. Ostwalt discusses the important religious images found in many of Lee Smith's works: "Two sets of images permeate Lee Smith's Appalachian fiction to portray a dual religious consciousness: the first appears in the form of traditional religions that attempt to transcend the mountain peaks and valley floors; the second is characterized by an elemental, supernatural power bound up by nature and the mountains themselves" (98). I contend that while this second religious consciousness Ostwalt characterizes as "supernatural" is certainly apart from the realm of the traditional religious narratives through which Smith's characters move, it is precisely this spirituality based in and around nature that both Grace and Molly attempt to tap into throughout *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*.

On Agate Hill charts the physical, psychological, and emotional growth of Molly Petree, a passionate strong-willed girl in the vein of Grace Shepherd looking for her place in her society and searching for her own identity. Through the characters of Molly and her schoolmaster's wife, Mariah Snow, Smith highlights the difficulties women face in finding spiritual fulfillment within the confines of these traditional religious narratives

Even Molly's diary, which Nora gave her to record her thoughts and feelings to the Lord, morphs into letters to Mary White, her friend and confidante, and, later, Nora; this is significant in that it reveals Molly's dissatisfaction with the prescribed method of venting her feelings. Molly chooses not to be subjugated by the religious pretext of going

to God quietly, waiting for her time in Heaven to shine, preferring to find spiritual fulfillment outside of this silent and silencing religious narrative.

It is in this context that Smith puts Molly Petree and Mariah Snow, showing her readers the consequences of rejecting or internalizing this rigid religious structure in *On Agate Hill*. Smith's characters, Ketchin says, "are seeking both to understand and receive acknowledgement of their wholeness as strong, creative, sexual females during a time of radical dislocation and social change, in a culture that would attempt to deny all but the most childlike or maternal expressions of womanhood." This characterization holds true for Molly Petree, who, from the time she was a little girl, struggled against the religious and social oppression that prevented her from becoming, as Ketchin puts it, "whole" (4).

In Molly's first entry in her diary, she refuses to take the advice of the preacher's wife and start her diary (in which, according to Nora, she should dutifully record her memories of her family and their tragedy) with the prayer, "Thy will be done O Lord on earth as it is in Heaven, Amen" (7). "NO," in bold letters, she proclaims, choosing instead to "write the truth as I see it" (7). Already Molly is rebelling against what she believes will silence her own story. So earnest is this desire to write her own story that Molly writes again, "I will write it all down every true thing in black and white upon the page, for evil or good it is my own true life and I WILL have it. I will" (8). Her "own true life" story is what follows, unfettered by the narratives of feminine life she sees failing all around her. Her mother has died in childbirth, and she witnesses not long after her aunt die in the same manner.

This assertion of self and rejection of submissive social narrative translate for Molly into skepticism of the religious life of her family as well. Molly's early confrontations with the rigid spiritual narratives of the other women in her young life seem half-formed and nebulous. Molly's interactions with Nora Gwyn, the preacher's wife, whom she thinks is as "pretty as a lady painted on a plate" but doesn't take seriously enough to obey, as well as uncle Junius's sister Sissy, whose moral and religious rigidity prove to Molly early in life that she needs to search elsewhere for spiritual and individual freedom. Molly does, however, articulate quite poignantly her desire for a more life-affirming and individualized spiritual narrative as she listens to her old, ailing Aunt Mitty warn her to turn away from her evil ways:

"I don't want [an eternal soul]. I don't want to go to Heaven either. I don't want to be an angel any more than I want to be a ghost girl. I want to be a real girl and live as hard as I can in this world, I don't want to lie in the bed like Mama or be sick like Mary White. Or be a lady. I want to live so hard and love so much I will use myself all the way up like a candle, it seems to me like this is the point of it all, not Heaven." (78)

For Molly, religion seems to be something forced upon her, an ill-fitting narrative from which she cannot get away. Strongly reminiscent of O'Connor's portrait of Christ as a ragged figure always following Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*, Molly describes Jesus as a "sharpshooter in Wade Hampton's army, moving from tree to tree with his rifle aimed at me" (101). This characterization of Jesus does not engender in Molly any kind of spiritual freedom or fulfillment. These youthful and childlike characterizations of the religious atmosphere of Molly's young life at Agate Hill foreshadow the more overt

spiritual rebellion Molly undergoes later in the novel, once she goes to Gatewood Academy.

It is at Gatewood Academy that Smith introduces Molly's religious counterpart in the character of Mariah Snow, the wife of the lecherous headmaster. Inasmuch as Molly is headstrong and openly skeptical of the oppressive spiritual narrative of her community, Mariah is the picture of religious piety and social correctness. Her journal, unlike Molly's, begins with religious objectives such as "The desire to cleanse and purify my own black soul, so oft beset by demons and thoughts too dark to tell," and "The Hope of greater Resignation to my lot, for what woman was ever more fortunate in being given such an opportunity to be of service?" (146). Mariah prays for the strength to "put on a cheerful face" for her husband and students; this is exactly the kind of self-denial Molly refuses to bear (146). In addition, Mariah begins her entries with, "For No One's Eyes" (147). This suggests that she feels a sense of religious privacy, one that denies her the right to express herself to those in power.

Upon arguing with her husband about business matters, specifically whether or not to continue to house and teach Molly, whom she despises for her blunt openness, self-assurance, and spiritual freedom, her husband reminds her of her duty to God and her husband: "It is not up to us to question Him. I know you will do your best with her" (152). Later she writes, "I am wrong, Dr. Snow is right, & am wrong & ungrateful & evil & low-minded . . . (Yet WHY does he know best? Oh stop it Mariah)" (152). She questions her husband's right to intellectual and spiritual superiority, yet convinces herself that she must remember her duty and station in the religious system to which she

subscribes. Her journal entries become increasingly filled with questions concerning her own religious beliefs, but always ending with a diatribe of self-loathing and a renewed commitment to continue doing her duty to God and her husband. She is sullen, often angry, and, finally, reduced to emotionless recording of the births of her children: “Gave birth” (162). Her entries regarding the tragic deaths of her children are equally as dispassionate: “Baby died” (167). Once Molly leaves the school after being assaulted by Mariah’s husband, Mariah breaks down completely, unable to accept her husband’s lechery, yet unable to forgive Molly her own self-assuredness and independence. In one of her last journal entries she writes, “So now they are gone, while I remain here in the cold stone school. Good riddance! I shall not miss them. Though I confess that I envy them, with all my heart” (212). She is resigned to her station, unable, as Molly has been, to find a new, more fulfilling spiritual path, on which she can find her own voice as a woman and as a spiritual being.

Molly continues to search for an alternative to the traditional religious narrative written for her by tradition and by the community of the Bobcat School in Jefferson, North Carolina where she becomes a teacher. She agrees to marry Henderson Hanes, a wealthy yet not totally trustworthy boy, but soon feels the weight of the community’s expectations of her. When townspeople press her to talk about her wedding ceremony, she says, “I’m so tired of people telling me what to do” (248). In her confusion over her growing feelings of religious and social oppression, Molly turns to the land for renewal and strength. Just as she and Mary White ran to the Indian clearing near Agate Hill, laid on the warm Indian rock and looked at the stars, now Molly turns to the land for comfort.

It is no surprise that she trades Henderson for Jacky Jarvis, a mountain man who sweeps her off her feet, marries her, and moves her up to Plain View in the North Carolina mountains. Recalling her initial insistence that her story be solely hers unfettered by someone else's interpretation, Molly calls this "her own true love story" (272).

Although Molly's story ends tragically with the death of her daughter, the murder of her husband, her subsequent return to Agate Hill, now in ruins, she finds peace and spiritual fulfillment in the natural world of the land of her youth. Instead of gravestones, she notices the sunflowers that commemorate her loved ones, "coming back every year, pretty as a picture" (350). She has abandoned completely the strict religious narrative she fought so hard against during her life, trading it for one based on the land she to which she is bound. She even moves into the tenant house, giving Agate Hill completely over to the encroaching weeds. This is symbolic—Molly has given up the physical buildings of her life—the house, her store with Jacky, Bobcat School, in order to be closer to the land in which she finds such fulfillment. Her last words are a benediction to the land, as she lists her favorite and most spiritual places, Indian Rock, Plain View, Agate Hill. For Molly, unlike her counterpart Mariah who refuses to find a way out of the repressive religious system in which she operates, these places are her church and the land becomes her spiritual home.

In *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill*, Lee Smith gives us characters like Grace and Molly who are anything but silent, anything but submissive. From the beginning of the novel, these women defy convention and tradition. They reject the religious narrative into which they are born and search for new spiritual landscapes with varying results.

They search for the hard ground of spiritual fulfillment, finding it despite the shifting sands of the religious narratives that confine them. In telling these stories, Lee Smith also redefines what it means to be a woman and a Christian in the South.

Grace and Molly differ in several important ways, however. I argue that Grace finds spiritual fulfillment in the waters of Scrabble Creek, but endangers this newly wrought independence by returning to the religious community of her father. Molly, on the other hand, chooses not to return to the confines of the community that oppresses her for most of her childhood. She abandons Agate Hill, choosing instead to live in the tenant house in which she feels closer to Nature. Smith complicates this neatly wrapped conclusion, however, by forcing the reader to decide which woman succeeds in creating a better spiritual narrative for herself. While Grace ultimately returns to Scrabble Creek and finds a renewed spiritual connection through nature, does her return to her father's church signal a return to the oppressive religious landscape in which she was raised? Or will Grace be the catalyst for change within an oppressive religious institution? Will she bridge the gap between institution and spirituality? Conversely, Smith leaves Molly's effectiveness in question as well. Although Molly's return to Agate Hill marks her acceptance of a more nature-centered spiritual narrative, she seems unlikely to be, as Grace might, a catalyst for progress within the religious community in which she was raised. Thus, Smith uses the stories of these two women to highlight the complicated role of women within their religious communities. Examining *Saving Grace* and *On Agate Hill* through this lens provides a larger and richer understanding of the ways religion and gender connect, as well as the way women negotiate their own sense of self and

individualism with the larger and tightly plotted spiritual narratives in which they operate.

CHAPTER III

“BOTH GRAVE AND RESURRECTION GROUND”: THE SEARCH FOR THE SPIRITUAL IN THE WATERS OF RON RASH’S FICTION

Ron Rash creates characters in his poetry, short fiction, and longer novels who are searching—searching for peace, fulfillment, and a spiritual home. They are characters grappling with a rapidly encroaching modern world, one that has torn or is beginning to tear them away from the one place that seems to hold the peace and contentment they are forced to search for: their land. Like Smith’s and Kenan’s fictional worlds, Rash’s world is grounded in spirituality that goes beyond the confines of any specific church. While his characters are not as outwardly religious in the vein of Virgil Shepherd and his Jesus Name Church, they are religious in the sense that they internalize a sense of right and wrong, of sin and redemption found in traditional Christian religious communities. They also believe in the spiritual power of the land they work and on which they live. It is here that Rash’s characters find the most personal fulfillment, a kind of spiritual satisfaction that is disappearing under the waters of modernity. As they move further away from the land, they lose this sense of groundedness, of stability for which their religious communities are a poor substitute. Thus, Rash creates a different picture of Nature and its spiritual powers. His characters search for spiritual narratives that allow them the same kind of peace and comfort as Lee Smith’s characters. However, Rash paints a different picture of Nature’s ability to provide this different spiritual landscape; his characters

search for ways to incorporate spirituality into their lives, but traditional religious communities do not provide this spiritual completeness, and the character's relationship with a Natural world that bears resemblance to a god-like power is tenuous at best.

This struggle with belief peppers a great deal of Rash's fiction and poetry. In his article "Words to Raise the Dead," critic Newton Smith contends that Rash's characters "struggle with belief, religion both felt and feigned. And they realize that something has been lost, something they valued most has disappeared" (13). This chapter discusses this idea of spiritual struggle in his novel *Saints at the River*. Rash's discussions of spirituality are not limited to novels, however. In his short story collection *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth*, Rash poignantly shows this inadequacies of traditional religion to provide the sense of belonging and spiritual fulfillment these characters have found in the natural world of Appalachia. Smith characterizes these characters as people "haunted by a past they do not fully know, yearning for an inner peace that seems impossible even in a small town, and trying to find their place in a world that does not accept them as they are" (13). In his poetry collections *Eureka Mill* and *Among the Believers*, he reveals characters who also struggle with modernity, searching for a spiritual fulfillment they only remember in their dreams of walking barefoot on mountain farms. And finally, in his novel *Saints at the River*, Rash most pointedly highlights the struggles his characters face in choosing between the divinity of nature and the harsh realities of the modern world.

Critics are just starting to notice and comment on Rash's works, and as a regional writer, most of these discussions are found in regional publications. While most of the critical coverage of Rash centers on his themes of memory and its relationship to

communities both thriving and lost, it is important to recognize Rash's insistence on bringing spirituality into the discussion³. And while his discussions of religion and spirituality are never overt or pragmatic and never venture into preachiness, he nevertheless insists on keeping this sense of spirituality just below the surface. For example, almost all of his works have titles that directly or indirectly reference biblical passages or ideas. The titles of his poetry collections include "Raising the Dead" and "Among the Believers;" those of his novels include *One Foot in Eden*, *The World Made Straight*, and *Saints at the River*; and his short story collection is titled *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina*.

In *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth*, Rash shows in greater detail the nature of organized religious communities in modern Appalachia. He describes the alienating and fracturing spiritual implications of a community that is divorced from the natural surroundings of Appalachia and either voluntarily and involuntarily separates itself from nature through urbanization. Joyce Compton Brown describes the community of Cliffside in which all the short stories in this collection are set as "a small Southern town, a mill town, an Appalachian out-migration town," and the characters as "eccentrics, outsiders, 'losers,' sensitive souls, all seemingly on the quest for redemption begun by all human beings as soon as they understand their own loss of innocence" (18). As three friends Tracy, Vincent, and Randy meet one night to watch the local eatery burn to the ground, they tell stories of remembrance—stories that directly or indirectly deal with Rash's common theme "of spiritual quest and journeying" (Brown 18).

³ See Biggers, House, Peeler, Smith, and Wiggins for their extended discussions on memory and its implications within Rash's works.

Tracy narrates one such story, “The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth.” The characters in the collection struggle with issues similar to those in *Saints at the River*, one of which is the struggle to find faith in an increasingly modern world. Rash characterizes the church as increasingly irrelevant and passé; its parishioners are alienated and uninterested in any true spiritual connection the church might provide. Indeed, Tracy explains the reasons behind Cliffside Baptist’s recent firing of the old preacher and subsequent hiring of the new: “[T]hey told about Preacher Crowe, who had gotten so senile he had preached the same sermon four weeks in a row, though they didn’t mention that a lot of the congregation hadn’t even noticed” (29). The congregation’s inability to notice their preacher’s senility is, while funny, indicative of their lack of interest in and connection to any authentic spiritual experience that comes from participation in the religious landscape of the church. Tracy’s comments set the tone for the rest of the story’s events and bring into sharp relief the direction in which organized religion in modern Appalachia is heading.

The story centers around the new preacher’s attempts to “put the church back on the right road” (31). While Preacher Thompson’s intentions are good, his plan backfires and the result is a hilarious and heartbreaking picture of a church without a spiritual backbone. Thompson accepts the help of Larry, a used car salesman and Tracy’s ex-husband, whom she calls “a snake.” The biblical reference to snakes is not unintentional—Rash uses biblical references and imagery to both underscore the religious tenets that are embedded in the psyche of this southern community as well as to underscore the ease with which the spiritual strength of the church can be undermined.

Larry's occupation as a used-car salesman carries with it the stereotypic image of someone who is sneaky and conniving, only looking out for his own welfare as well as the quick buck. He convinces the preacher that he had a vision from God telling him to recreate the crucifixion at Easter, with him "playing Jesus" (31). Tracy's description of Larry's vision highlights Rash's characterization of the organized church as disingenuous: "the whole thing sounded more like one of those U.F.O. stories in *The National Examiner* than a religious experience, and about as believable" (32). Indeed, Tracy describes the event as a "sales pitch": "He was selling his crucifixion idea the same way he would sell a '84 Buick in his car lot. And it was working" (32). While Rash characterizes Larry as a fraud who bastardizes the seminal religious tenet of Christianity, more importantly, he shows the congregants' willingness to buy into Larry's way of thinking. Rash points to the modern commodification of religious experience and suggests the unlikelihood of traditional religious narratives to provide any real or lasting spiritual fulfillment.

Tracy, the local carpenter, works on the construction of the crosses, and comments on Larry's appearance as he oversees the project: "Larry was . . . pointing and waving his arms like he was a Hollywood director . . . [he] was not just trying to act like but look like he was from California, which meant, as far as I was concerned, that, unlike Jesus, he actually deserved to be nailed to a cross" (35). Larry's actions and demeanor suggest a commercialization of religion that Rash sees as the effect of increasing urbanization and modernization in Appalachia.

Larry refuses to heed Tracy's warnings about the instability of the crosses that he made; instead of using Tracy's stronger, more expensive wood, Larry chooses flimsier cheaper materials and constructs his crosses quickly and without proper effort and consideration. Tracy tells him, "Anybody who gets up on one of those things better have a whole lot of faith" (38). The sign Larry puts up the night of the production epitomizes this commodification of religion and lack of authentic spiritual feeling: "The Crucifixion of Jesus CHRIST Is Paid for and Presented by LARRY RUDISELL'S Used Cars of Cliffside, North Carolina" (40). The story's inevitable climax finds Larry on the makeshift cross, which predictably falls, injuring Larry's body as well as his pride. Tracy recounts the fall in particularly important detail: "Larry screamed out, 'God help me,' probably the sincerest prayer of his life. But it went unanswered" (42). Rash uses the flimsiness of the cross construction that leads to Larry's "fall from grace" and the commercial nature of this religious event to create an important metaphor: The cross of this new religion isn't strong enough to support its congregants. More importantly, the congregants themselves do not look to their religious community to provide any lasting spiritual fulfillment; instead it becomes a venue to make money and garner accolades for individuals. Rash suggests that this religious landscape is unsuccessful in providing the people of Appalachia with authentic spiritual fulfillment. In his poetry and in the novel *Saints at the River*, however, he provides a different model for spirituality, one that includes nature and the divinity found in it.

In *Among the Believers*, Rash delves more directly into personal faith, not the divide between religion and the spirituality found in the natural world these characters

have had to leave behind in order to make a better life for themselves and their children. Rash himself describes this collection thus: “The book is about belief, faith in the broadest sense. It is about Christian belief and Celtic folklore. As a result much of it is mysterious, as is often the case with matters of faith” (Smith 16). It is these broad spiritual strokes with which Rash deals in his fiction and poetry. Unlike Smith, who deals directly with particular religious communities and their effects on Grace Shepherd and Molly Petree, Rash instead deals with an unspoken spiritual connection between nature and divinity, a connection that some of his characters have and nurture and others only long for. While many of the poems in this collection center on the loss of geographical homeland and the spiritual and emotional fracture this loss causes, Rash’s poem “On the Watauga,” highlights the connection between divinity and nature. This brand of religious feeling is “mysterious and brutal . . . always chimerical” (Smith 17). The short poem’s entirety creates a haunting picture of the divinity of nature:

On the bank of a river
He saw a tall tree, one half
Crimson fire from root to crown,
The other half green with leaves.
All night the firelight colored
The river red as a wound.
A full moon loomed as he walked
Into the waist-deep water,
Bathed and tugged by a current
Flickering like a cold flame
Until the stars dimmed like sparks,
The tall tree’s heat lit the sun,
And he staggered to the shore
White-eyed, blinded by Godlight. (13)

The scene recalls Moses and the burning bush, while centering the religious imagery distinctly within the realm of the river and its natural surroundings. The man in the poem undergoes a kind of baptism by walking into the water, pulled not only by the literal current of the river but also by the pull of the divinity of the scene, the sacred image of the burning tree beside the river. He comes out of the river having seen or at the least sensed the Divine here in the river. This image of the river becomes central to Rash's pieces that deal with this idea of the divinity of the natural world. He himself said in a 2003 interview that water "serves as a source of both destruction and salvation" in his works: "And also just being a southern Baptist, being immersed in water literally when I was baptized, that religious symbolism of water represents for Christians both death and resurrection" (Brown 338). This image of the river as representative of the divine is found in many of his works and becomes the basis for my discussion of Saints at the River.

Other of his poetry collections also recall this idea that spirituality and religious feeling lay in the realm of nature. In *Among the Believers*, one such poem is entitled "North of Asheville." It chronicles the search for a drowned boy, while congregants prayed by the river for the boy's recovery. The poem highlights this idea of water carrying the divine gift of both life and death: "for that was what / they believed, those on the shore / since morning, who'd gathered that / spring dawn so the sun might rise / above lives saved by water . . . Because they could not wake him, / the fourth day she surrendered / his body to the earth" (36). The mother who comes to terms with her son's drowning in the river that baptizes everyone in her religious community believes in the

end her son returns, “his shirt sleeves / dripping as he lay warm hands / on hers so she might believe” (36). Her son becomes part of the river and beseeches his mother to believe in his salvation through water.

Another poem in the collection also highlights the connection between the natural world and the divine world. In “The Language of Canaan,” Rash creates not a narrative poem as in “North of Asheville” and “On the Watauga” but a series of natural images that blend seamlessly with images of a spiritual realm. The dawn “caught and dazzled on / dew beads strung to spider’s web,” shadows merge with “meadow / like calming hand,” and human voices reflect “a cadence so pure / ears deaf a lifetime now heard”: these images recall divine miracles, highlight the merging of the natural world with the divine, and create a place “streamside” where “one world bled into another” (24). These poems crystallize Rash’s idea of a spiritual union between nature and the divine, conveying in a few lines what his novels speak in hundreds of pages. The images of the natural world and its divine power to both give life and take it are most clearly and thoroughly developed in his novel *Saints at the River*.

In *Saints at the River*, water, both a destructive force and a life-giving one, becomes the central and most significant image of nature as metaphor for the divine. As Susan Lefler describes, water is “both grave and resurrection ground” for the characters in the novel (73). Just as in Rash’s first novel *One Foot in Eden*, in *Saints* the waters in and around the mountains of Tamassee, both natural and man-made, become the central image of the divine. Water takes on a holy and divine sense, personified as Godlike, both forgiving transgressions and baptizing for new life as well as life taking and punisher for

those who do not heed its power. For Rash, the divine power found in nature is connective tissue for his characters—those who accept it and seek it out are closest to spiritual fulfillment while those who separate themselves from it are lost, damned to lives of separation from their true place, in the mountains of Appalachia. As Susan Lefler points out, Rash’s river “holds this tension between salvation and destruction, between holiness and doom” (74).

Saints at the River begins with an epilogue that charts a twelve-year-old girl’s thoughts as she wades in the turbulent Tamassee River on the border of South Carolina and Georgia; the girl ultimately becomes too bold, wading where the river becomes too strong, and she drowns when she is swept under and held beneath a rocky outcropping by a hydraulic. Rash’s description of the girl’s final moments poignantly and heartbreakingly underscores nature’s role in the novel—nature becomes the representation of divine presence in the novel, one that is both spiritually fulfilling and devastatingly ruthless. Unlike the characterization of nature in Lee Smith’s works, the idea that nature offers her characters freedom and independence, Rash gives nature a very Old Testament feel. Nature, like the God of the Old Testament, should be respected above all else, and when respect is lost, either by choice or by chance, characters are at the mercy of a harsh and unforgiving divine presence. This epilogue, then, sets the tone of the novel from the beginning, especially in terms of nature’s role in the lives of the characters who interact with her.

This little girl, whom we find out is named Ruth Kowalski and around whose body the central conflict of the novel surrounds, drowns in the Tamassee that day, and

Rash describes her final moments thus: “the lungs explode in pain and then the pain is gone along with the dark as bright colors shatter around her like glass shards, and she remembers her sixth grade science class as her teacher held a prism out of the window so it might fill with cooler, and she has a final beautiful thought—that she is now inside that prism and knows something even the teacher does not know, that the prism’s colors are voices, voices that swirl around her head like a crown, and at that moment her arms and legs she did not even know were flailing cease and she becomes part of the river” (5).

Rash gives his readers an initial image of the river as final resting place, one that is both terribly beautiful and aching destructive. The river, then, is the nexus for spirituality in the novel; and as the central representation of Nature in the novel, the Tamassee is the barometer with which each of the main characters is judged in terms of their own personal journey to spiritual fulfillment. Some separate themselves from Nature by choice or by chance, sometimes both, and it is these characters who Rash depicts as spiritually unfulfilled. On the opposite pole are characters that have remained in tune with the land and the river, and it is these characters who are the most connected to the land and thus the most spiritually grounded in the novel.

Maggie Glenn, the main character of the novel, is the character Rash depicts as the most separated from Nature and the natural surroundings of her youth. Maggie, a native of Oconee County on the South Carolina-Georgia border, has left Tamassee for the midlands of South Carolina and is a photographer for a Columbia newspaper. Her relationship with her editor highlights her separation from Oconee and her family home; more importantly it highlights her separation from the divinity found in the natural world

of her youth. As she and her editor Lee discuss her assignment to photograph the Ruth Kowalski death for the accompanying article, both her and Lee's glib statements surrounding the young girl's death reveal their disassociation from the spiritual importance of the life/death cycle: "[T]his could be one hell of a story. Just pray they don't get her out before that dam's built, because you'll get some good pictures, something UPI or Reuters might pick up." Maggie responds with, "I think I'll save my prayers for a worthier cause" (12).

Although Maggie seems to reject Lee's commodification of Ruth's death, her sarcasm and sardonic tone reveal her own lack of spiritual connection with or empathy for the spiritual repercussions of her involvement with the story. She recognizes her own (as well as those she works with) disconnectedness not just with the natural world but with other people as well: "I went back to my cubicle and stared at a blank screen. The only sounds in the surrounding cubicles were fingertips tapping keyboards. Ten people in the room and not one talking. You would have thought human speech had become obsolete as smoke signals" (14). Although Maggie refers to those around her and not specifically to herself in this case, she is also implicated in this isolation and silence. Her Aunt Margaret called her a wanderer, Maggie tells us, and she herself admits her own youthful need to separate herself her rural mountainous community: "Aunt Margaret's prophecy had been correct, for college and each new job took me farther from the mountains—first Clemson, then Laurens, and now Columbia. It had not been until the Columbia move that I recognized a steady eastward migration toward Charleston" (68). Maggie wanted to run away from the place she grew up, and now as an adult she sees the

repercussions of that desire—a sense of isolation from her home and community, one that leaves her feeling lost and spiritually defunct.

As Maggie returns to Oconee county for the story and is confronted with the particulars of the Ruth Kowalski death as well as her own demons from her past, she becomes increasingly aware of her own separateness and spiritual emptiness as she reconnects with the land and the people of her youth. As she describes the crux of the problem with retrieving Ruth's body from the hydraulic in the Tamassee that holds it captive under the surface, she sums up the problem in terms similar to those Rash seems to apply to the corruption of religious communities in an increasingly secularized and modernized world. Maggie tells Allen, "It's nice to know there's something in the world that's uncorrupted. Something that can't be bought and cut up into pieces so somebody can make money off it" (34). She remembers times with her brother Ben when their interactions with nature brought them closer together and closer to the spiritual comfort a divine presence can bring in times of trouble. She and Ben found a cave in the rocky mountains around their home where they would go to escape from a rocky and turbulent home life after the devastating accident that left Ben's face and part of Maggie's arm burned and scarred. Within the cave they found old Native American wall etchings, which Maggie explains to Ben: "I think someone was hurting and this is the way they prayed for help" (87). Although this connection to others long dead makes Maggie uneasy, both she and Ben recognize the power of the place, the divine presence found within the walls of that cave and indeed all around them in the natural world.

As Maggie drives back to Tamassee for the first time after a long absence, her descriptions of the changes in the geography from Columbia to the Upstate highlight Rash's idea of nature as a divine presence in the lives of his characters: "On some of these curves you will see a cross made of wood or Styrofoam. Often there is a vase or Mason jar filled with flowers, sometimes a plastic angel or pair of praying hands. Shrines that make the ascent like some Appalachian version of the stations of the cross" (18). Rash's Appalachia is one of deep connections to traditional religious communities: "WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB proclaimed a graying piece of wood nailed to a tree. A few yards beyond was another wooden sign with DAMASCUS PENTECOSTAL CHURCH and an arrow pointing left" (20). However, he reserves his most spiritual descriptions for the natural world of Upstate South Carolina. He peppers the landscape with Judas trees and Dogwoods, and designates the Tamassee River as the main natural representative of divine power and connection.

For Rash, the divine power of Nature serves a somewhat different purpose than does the natural geography of Lee Smith's fiction. Smith characterizes the landscape in *Saving Grace* as a conduit for freedom and spiritual independence for her female characters like Grace and Molly. Rash characterizes the divinity and spirituality found in the natural world differently, and not as specifically positive for one group of the population. While Smith's divine presence is distinctly feminine, Rash's takes on a much more Old Testament religious power. The Tamassee and its falls and cliffs are not as nurturing, while they retain a powerful spiritual connective tissue for the people of Tamassee. The River demands a respect akin to that paid to God by the Old testament

characters: “Wolf Cliff is a place where Nature has gone out of its way to make humans feel insignificant,” Rash reminds us through Maggie’s description of the place where Ruth Kowalski drowned. She describes the cliffs and falls in terms not as nurturing and freeing as Smith does; indeed, her description invokes as much fear and awful respect as it does beauty: “The cliff itself is two hundred feet of granite that looms over the gorge. A fissure jags down its gray face like a piece of black embedded lightning. . . . Even water that looks calm moves quick and dangerous. The falls itself . . . spills into a pool big and deep enough to cover a house trailer” (81). This divine power is one Maggie and the people of Tamasee must respect—through this respect and reverent abeyance comes a fulfillment that is different than that for Smith’s characters but no less important for their spiritual wellbeing.

If Maggie is the character in the novel who searches hardest for a her own place in a new, postmodern spiritual landscape not found in her journey further and farther away from her childhood home, Luke becomes for Rash the spokesperson for the importance of connection to the land and its spiritual importance in the lives of those who live and work in Tamasee. As he and Maggie talk for the first time since their breakup, Luke becomes the voice of divine truth. He tells her, “I taught you better than that, Maggie. You know there is always more than one reality” (88). Luke’s insistence that Maggie needs to follow her instincts about the importance of respecting the river and its divine power is something that Maggie struggles with throughout the novel, and with which she comes to a slippery and tenuous ceasefire by the end of her story. Maggie compares Luke’s eyes to “Tamasee’s deepest pools on sunny days . . . you saw through the pool to the rocks

and sand at the bottom. When you looked into them it seemed you saw not into but through them, toward a place of utter clarity” (88). Rash characterizes Luke as the moral and spiritual center of the novel, the character that represents the alternative spiritual landscape Maggie must accept and the character that preaches the gospel of the River and its importance in all of our lives.

While Rash situates Maggie in the middle of the nature/secular poles (and sliding fast in favor of secularization and spiritual isolation), he highlights the poles of the conflict through the characters of Herb Kowalski, Ruth’s father, and Luke Miller, a river guide, environmental activist, and local expert on the Tamassee River and its federal status as a Wild and Scenic river. Kowalski wants a temporary dam erected in order to get his daughter’s body out of the river, while Luke is fighting against the dam under the argument that to put it up violates federal law. While these arguments on the surface have little to do with religious matters, Luke articulates the spiritual differences between traditional religious rational for Ruth’s burial and a more environmentally spiritual reasoning.

Rash characterizes Luke as the Christ figure, or at the very least the John the Baptist figure in this cast of characters—indeed, Luke is the advocate for the River in the story. During the initial informational town meeting at which Kowalski and his engineers describe the temporary dam, Maggie looks at the front row at “Luke’s disciples,” the group of “river rats” and activists who support Luke and the Tamassee in this conflict: “[T]he guides considered the river sacred, and it was inevitable they’d be drawn to Luke and his cause” (51). It is Luke that articulates the reasons behind leaving Ruth’s body

where it came to final rest, and his speech brings into sharp relief the divine position nature (and specifically the Tamassee River) holds in this community:

‘I don’t have a daughter,’ Luke said, his voice no longer confrontational, almost gentle. ‘But if I did and she was dead and I knew there was nothing I could do to make her alive again, I can’t think of a place I’d rather her body be than in the Tamassee. I’d want her where she’d be part of something pure and good and unchanging, the closest thing to Eden we’ve got left. You tell me where there’s a more serene and beautiful place on this planet. You tell me a more holy place, Mr. Brennon, because I don’t know one.’ (53)

Maggie recognizes the truth in his speech, and she sees that everyone on the room was “in abeyance, that Luke had taken us into that quiet, beautiful place where Ruth Kowalski lay suspended” (53). Maggie, although separated from the land and her community for years, realizes after Luke’s speech that she belongs in Appalachia and close to the natural world that represents for her a completeness she doesn’t have in Columbia. She admits, “He was voicing much of what I believed as well” (54). Kowalski and Brennon, his engineer and builder of the temporary dam, are not swayed by this religiously colored metaphor for Ruth’s final resting place, and Rash opens the ideological and spiritual chasm between them and Luke and the other members of the community of Tamassee as the novel goes on.

Rash’s depiction of nature holding a sacred and divine place in the lives of the people of Tamassee crystallizes again as Maggie remembers about a time when Luke almost drowned in the river years ago during their love affair. He tells Maggie after she and other river rats witness him being sucked into a hydraulic not unlike the one that

claimed Ruth Kowalski; she sees in his expression an attitude of religious reverence: “The look on his face was more than just serene, it was beatific, like the faces of the raptured in Renaissance paintings” (64). Luke tells Maggie, “Part of me wanted to stay. That hydraulic was like the still center of the universe . . . It was like entering eternity. That’s what the Celts believed—that water was a conduit to the next world” (64). Both Luke’s reverent and worshipful tone and his reference to Celtic religious tenets creates the dual idea that the River is both a sacred religious space as well as one that is separate from the traditional religious spaces of the Appalachian South.

Even after her return to Tamasee and her uncomfortable reunion with Luke, Maggie has yet to see herself as connected to the land, and she refuses to acknowledge that it is precisely that connection which can alleviate her own isolation from herself and from others. As she photographs Herb Kowalski on the banks of the river that claimed his child, she recognizes her own complicity in compromising the sanctity of the river in helping Kowalski’s side. Her photograph of him becomes the catalyst for public approval of the recovery mission, but she convinces herself she is neutral in the debate. She is still trying to deny the power of the river and the spiritual connection it can provide her at this point in the novel. As she takes Kowalski’s picture, she thinks, “At that moment the part of me that aimed the lens cared nothing about Herb Kowalski or his daughter or the river or federal law. . . . It’s only about light and texture, I told myself. I’m just an observer, showing what’s already there” (97 – 8). Maggie is still separated emotionally and spiritually from nature at this point in the novel; although she has made

the physical journey back to the land, her spiritual connection remains unsuccessful and her search for a fulfilling and positive spiritual landscape remains unfulfilled.

Luke explains to Allen later in the novel the difficulty in giving the River the respect it deserves: “It will take guts to say what . . . is right . . . that the girl’s body is the Tamasee’s now, that the moment she stepped in the shallows she accepted the river on its own terms. That’s what wilderness is—nature on its terms, not ours, and there’s no middle ground. It either is or it isn’t” (106). This statement sums up Rash’s idea about Nature’s role as a spiritual guide in the lives of his characters: acceptance and reverence, giving up control of our lives in order to find spiritual wholeness. These ideas are not unfamiliar to those in traditional religious communities. Luke delivers this message to Maggie, who can’t yet accept that she must give up some control in order to find peace.

As reluctant as Maggie is to accept the spiritual offering of the River and, by addition to that, the spiritual divinity found in the natural world, she characterizes traditional religious communities as equally unfulfilling: “I remembered the Sunday mornings in church, Preacher Tilson, red-faced from shouting and pacing back and forth, the Bible raised above his head. I remembered the shouts and tears, the speaking in tongues, and how frightening it all was” (116). She remembers as well the moments after she and her brother were burned the preacher’s description of hell during church meetings: “ ‘The wicked are their own wick’ was how Reverend Tilson described hell the morning he lit a candle in church and had us pass it around as he preached” (128). He uses fear to intimidate his parishioners into good behavior, but Maggie understands even at a young age that this kind of intimidation only serves to isolate her even further from

her religious community. She is separate from the religious community that frightens her, yet she is separate from the natural world Luke sees as divine. Maggie is presently lost in the middle, searching for a fulfillment that neither can give her.

Rash creates in Maggie a character with this sense of loss and alienation from both the world in which she grew up and the world to which she flees, ever further from the spiritual belonging of Tamassee and its environs. It is when she returns to Tamassee that she begins to feel more connected to those around her as she connects herself more closely with the River of her youth. This is most clearly rendered during a conversation Maggie has with Allen, the journalist with which she returns to Tamassee to cover the Kowalski drowning. As she opens up about her life to Allen, Rash sets her story distinctly between descriptions of the River by which they talk. As Maggie talks, the River is interjecting its presence, urging her to break her isolation; a trout breaks the river's surface, calling her (and the reader's) attention down into the water. Rash forces us to connect the river to Maggie's first steps toward trusting another. She tells Allen about a failed relationship with a man in Laurens, who accused her of "shutting [herself] off from others" and used the term "emotional frigidity" in his descriptions of her. It is not an accident that Rash situates this relationship away from Tamassee during Maggie's flight from the natural environment that connects her to her past.

One of the most poignant scenes highlights this need for connection for Maggie, and the river's ability to bridge the chasm of her isolation in order for Maggie to connect with herself and others in a deeply spiritual and personal way. After she and Allen share a romantic moment on the bridge over the Tamassee, Maggie goes back to her room and

“thought about earlier when dark blurred the river with the bank and trees. I remembered how the river was only a sound whispering below us as Allen and I stood on a bridge connecting two states” (123). Rash plays on the river’s connection of two states—South Carolina and Georgia—as well as the two states of Maggie’s journey toward spiritual fulfillment. The river is the catalyst for this journey back to Tamassee and the driving divine force propelling her toward a sense of belonging.

Rash peppers Maggie’s present condition with her memories from years ago during her affair with Luke and her time as a river rat. Rash uses these memories to contrast Maggie’s current sense of alienation with that of her past connection to the river and the sense of belonging it brings. She remembers when Luke handed her a dipper to drink from the river:

‘Aren’t you afraid you’ll get sick?’ I asked.
‘No. This water’s from three springs, and every one of them is on forest land. It’s the purest water in the state.’ Luke filled the dipper again and held it out to me.
‘As the poet said, ‘Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.’
I drank water so cold my teeth ached, and then we sat on the cool. Plush moss.
(162)

This scene recalls Grace Shepherd’s baptism in Scrabble Creek at the conclusion of *Saving Grace*—both scenes depict characters who find wholeness in the waters of their homelands. Luke’s use of Robert Frost’s poem “Directive” is fitting for this idea. In it the speaker recounts Nature’s restorative and redemptive properties for those lost in a world of increasing modernization. Rash allows Maggie to experience this sense of divine connection in her early years; by making Maggie leave this connective tissue and

search with an increasingly isolating lack of success for the same kind of spiritual connection in other places away from Tamasee, Rash underscores the difficulties in both finding and holding on to such a spiritual landscape. Unlike Smith, who allows her characters to return successfully to a newly appropriated spiritual landscape, Rash points out the all-too-common fragmentation of such a unifying spiritual experience. Maggie becomes the representative of the fleeting nature of such a spiritual landscape, and through her relatively tenuous stalemate in finding spiritual solace in the figurative waters of her hometown Rash sends the message that sometimes a spiritual high ground is too hard to find.

Perhaps the most compelling scene in the novel comes when Maggie remembers her first sexual experience with Luke, which happens fittingly on the banks of the Tamasee. As in Smith's *Saving Grace*, nature becomes a conduit for ecstatic experience not unlike those in religious rituals. Just like Grace, Maggie also experiences sexual awakening, which is tied directly to the natural landscape where the experience occurs. Maggie connects the sacred experience in nature to that of a religious rite:

The air felt charged and alive, like when lightning breaks the sky before rain. Though we were in slow water, the river's pulse seemed to quicken. Everything, including Luke and me, shimmered in a golden light. For the first time in my life I saw the river as Luke saw it. (165)

That Maggie's description of the landscape that morning closely resembles a metaphoric sexual experience is not lost on Rash; indeed, he continues to connect nature, sexual experience and spirituality (spirituality distinctly different from the religious experience

of the characters' organized religious communities) in the same way Smith does through Grace's experiences with Lamar and again with Travis:

A Church of God preacher in Mountain View had denounced us as 'false prophets' who worshipped nature, not God, as though one were not part of the other. At the community center we'd kidded ourselves about being religious zealots . . . But Luke had never joined in the joking. On that September morning I understood his seriousness, that what we were trying to save *was* holy, for I was not just in the presence of something sacred and eternal but for a few seconds inside it. (165)

This connection Maggie forges with Luke combines sexual ecstasy, religious fervor, and spiritual connection with another human, creating for Maggie the fulfillment she remembers and longs for once she has forsaken Tamassee for a life that turns out to be emotionally and spiritually unfulfilling. When she tells Allen that she ultimately sides with Luke in the issue of Ruth Kowalski and preserving the Tamassee, Maggie makes her decision to stay in Tamassee and search for the connection she once had with both the land and the community in which she lived.

That decision is solidified after the dam breaks, the recovery mission fails, and the Tamassee claims another life, one sacrificed in an attempt to recover Ruth Kowalski's body. When Randy, a friend of Maggie's drowns in the River, Maggie decides to try to reconnect with her father. This attempt is followed by one of the most telling scenes in the novel with regard to the unifying affect nature has on Rash's characters. Maggie wakes in the night, listening to the sounds of Tamassee wildlife:

I'd often had trouble sleeping well in Laurens and Columbia, and always assumed the reason was the sound of cars passing, neighbors shutting doors and dragging trash cans to the curb, but now I realized it was also what I didn't hear—rain on a tin roof, crickets, tree frogs, owls, whippoorwills—sounds so much a part of the night you didn't even notice them until they were absent. (217)

It is this moment Rash brings into greatest relief how far removed Maggie has become from the Natural landscape of her Appalachian home, and, more importantly, the solace and relative contentment the natural world brings to Maggie in times she needs it most.

At Randy's funeral by the river, Maggie sees Reverend Tilson, and remembers her own baptism into Christian service; however, it is the river into which she is submerged during the baptism that takes on the most significance for Maggie now. Reverend Tilson, the representative of the traditional religious community, is characterized as old and irrelevant in comparison to the river. Maggie remembers him at her baptism as an energetic man, but now she sees him as a representative of an institution ineffective in providing solace or comfort in this crisis: "Sweat soaked his shirt, sticking to his skin like gauze to a wound . . . Now, sixteen years later, he paused between each step as if uncertain the ground would support him. He walked alone to the water's edge. He turned his back to the falls and faced his congregation" (218). In this scene Rash symbolically represents the marginalization of the power and importance of nature by the religious community of Tamassee; his message becomes clear—ignore the divinity found in nature and your religious experience is only half-formed, partly-knowable, and thus only partly able to fill your spiritual needs.

During the funeral Maggie hears the prayers of the congregants “blending with the sound of the river” (223). She sees that religious experience for the people of Tamasee is not complete without the River and the natural surroundings: (the murmur of prayers merged with the sound of the river. It’s Sunday morning, I thought, as though somehow I’d not realized that. Sunday morning in a place where it meant more than sleeping late and a leisurely read of the Sunday paper” (227).

The end of the novel finds Maggie having returned to Tamasee to take care of her estranged and dying father. Maggie realizes that in order to find peace she must return to the river, finding the strength to face her own past and problems with her family and within herself. Maggie returns to the bridge over the Tamasee at the end of the novel. She stands in the center of the bridge and reflects on her renewed connection with the spiritual power of the river: “I watch the rat scrape and slide downstream, then through Deep Sluice and past Bobcat Rock. The sun is out and the bright colors refract and merge as I offer a kind of prayer” (236). Maggie is leaving Tamasee, however, and her departure further complicates the tenuous spiritual reconciliation Maggie has forged with the natural surroundings of Appalachia. Her reconnection with Tamasee and the river she loved as a young woman allowed her strength enough to reconcile with her father, help him die with dignity, and fulfill her responsibility to her family. Yet her departure creates questions as to the lasting efficacy of her spiritual reconnection. This ending, not exactly happy but not entirely negative, allows Rash to postulate on the difficulty of retaining such an emotional and spiritual connection with a landscape that is slowly succumbing to modernization and development. This physical loss of the

landscape parallels the spiritual deterioration of those who live and work in this part of rural Appalachia, and Maggie becomes for Rash the representation of this dying community. Indeed, the last sentence suggests both the spiritual power of the river and the fleeting connection the people of the community have with it: “[N]o current slows or curves in acknowledgment of Ruth Kowalski and Randy Moseley’s once-presence, for they are now and forever lost in the river’s vast and generous unremembering” (237).

In *Saints at the River*, the river becomes the representative of the divinity found in Nature, something both Rash and Lee Smith see as an important addition to (and sometimes replacement for) the traditional religious landscape of Appalachia. Indeed, Rash certainly engenders nature with a sense of both harshness and salvation given to representations of God within traditional Christian religious narrative. And the characters that populate *Saints at the River* have complex and complicated relationships with the river. Maggie is the main character and the one whom the reader is allowed the most emotional access; she has one of the most complicated relationships with the landscape of her youth and the spirituality connected to it. Rash illustrates in this novel the idea that the more we separate ourselves from the elemental spiritual divinity found in nature and the land of our fathers, the more alienated and disconnected we find ourselves. Through the experiences of Maggie and the other inhabitants of Oconee County, Rash provides a touchingly revealing warning that a physical and emotional relationship with nature provides the closest spiritual connection to the divinity most traditional religious communities claim to conduit.

Ultimately, for Rash the path to spiritual fulfillment is not as obvious as in Smith and Kenan; his fiction is populated with the lost, and their loss is tied directly to their separation from the mountains and springs of the Appalachian foothills and mountains. They have been separated from homes, either voluntarily in the out-migration to mill towns or forced out by the modernization of reservoirs and man-made lakes. Thus, they search for salvation and redemption in the religious sense they have been taught to seek but cannot find. They have “One Foot in Eden,” but spiritual fulfillment is fading fast. Their journeys epitomize the idea Rash develops in most of his fiction and poetry: In a world slowly succumbing to modernization, connection with the land and with nature and acceptance of its spiritual importance (both positive and negative) in the lives of the people surrounding it is crucial to a sense of personal and spiritual fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

Biblical scholar J.B. Phillips highlights the importance of leaving behind antiquated notions of God and religion in *Your God is Too Small*: “The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static” (7). His contention is that we need to allow our perception of divinity and religion to move beyond a “hothouse God who could only exist between the pages of a Bible” to a spirituality that encompasses a more complex and many-layered human experience (8). While Phillips wrote these lines over fifty years ago, they are as relevant in today’s society as they were then. Randall Kenan, Lee Smith, and Ron Rash also see the need for throwing out outmoded and narrowly defined religious ideals and communities. Religious readings of these texts are important additions to the critical canons of each of these authors; indeed, a religious understanding of them becomes the tie that binds all of the current critical readings of the texts together. Religion becomes the heart of these texts, the mode through which these authors have chosen to comment on human experience.

Ultimately Kenan, Smith, and Rash take issue with Faulkner’s idea that religion is just part of the southern experience and it does not matter whether southerners believe or do not believe. These authors seek to engage this religious ubiquity, asserting that it does

indeed matter how much we believe, what we believe in, and how we reject and reshape and reclaim the spirituality found in outmoded and stale religious practices.

The texts at the heart of this project deal with the ways contemporary southerners seek out and search for spiritual fulfillment. It is interesting that these authors, like their literary predecessors, have bucked the religious system; they at once critique the marginalization and inhumanity of a religious system that has become more interested in institutional concerns rather than the individual as well as assert that spirituality is an integral part of the southern landscape and therefore must be reckoned with.

It is also important to reflect on these authors' works as representative of a postmodern shift in religious narrative in general. They highlight the shift away from a modern view of religion to a more fragmented idea of spiritual narrative. John Duvall explains the difference thus: "The modernists still held out hope for authentic identity. The postmodernists . . . represent identity as an ideological mirage, much more a social construct or a performance than an authenticity" (viii). This idea of postmodernism, especially as it applies to religion, is certainly evident in the fiction of the authors I have chosen for this project. The conclusion I make about the ways these authors approach religion fit into these categories of modernist and postmodernist thought, with the emphasis on, as Duvall points out, "the representation of identity and identity formation" (viii). Specifically, these authors deal with religious identity. Through centering on the successes and failures of their characters in finding a sense of spiritual fulfillment in this increasingly fragmented and postmodern world, these authors highlight a distinct and growing polarity between religious institution and spiritual identity. Kenan

points out the dangers of the search for this authentic religious identity, highlighting the devastating consequences of failing to find it (in *A Visitation of Spirits*) and the tentative successes that a broader view of inclusive religious practice could provide (in “The Foundations of the Earth”). Lee Smith projects a more modernist definition of spirituality: Grace Shepherd and Molly Petree search for an authentic identity, finding it squarely outside the realm of organized religion. Of these three authors, however, Rash creates the most postmodern sense of spirituality. The idea of religion as postmodern performance is especially apropos in “The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth,” in which he creates a religious community that has become merely performance in the strictest sense of the word.

Ultimately these authors grapple with universal concerns about the changing nature of spirituality in the contemporary South. What constitutes spirituality, and how can traditional religious institutions endeavor to return this idea of “the spirit” to the institution itself? Critic Ahib Hassan defines “spirit” in a way that highlights its changing nature in contemporary times. His definition “center[s] on something fundamental to human existence yet intangible, an activating principle, a cosmic curiosity, a deeper meaning, often religious or metaphysical in character” (5). Smith keeps a distinct sense of modernity; Rash and Kenan move past this modern sense and place their texts within the postmodern sense of spirituality. They define spirituality as something intangible, a concept not always associated with religious institutionalism. Hassan poetically comments, “[S]pirit does not offer invariable solace . . . it has its harshness, its clouds of unknowing, its dark nights of the soul” (5). Rash (and indeed all three of the authors in

this project) highlights the chasm between the thriving fundamentalist religious landscape of the South and the problems current southern writers find within this landscape.

Finally, it is my argument that the authors in this project call for a reinterpretation of what it means to be religious, to be spiritual, or to belong to a “religion.” They call for a more fluid, inclusive definition of man’s relationship with the divine. They become representatives of the “modern religious reformer” Wilfred Smith calls for so adamantly, whose job is “to help men not to let their religion stand between them and God. Faith . . . is deeply personal, dynamic, ultimate” (127).

This, of course, means different things to each of these three authors. Kenan calls for reform within religious communities that make no accommodation for difference in sexuality; indeed, his solution is more akin to religious humanism rather than the formation of a more inclusive religious institutional denomination. This notion is particularly important and innovative within African American society, where the church has been portrayed as an accepted avenue for social and spiritual nourishment.

For Smith, the feminine divine is most fully developed within natural space, particularly that of the Appalachian foothills and mountains. Grace and Molly connect spiritually not through their religious communities but through the natural world. This is an important assertion in contemporary society, especially since a more nature-friendly and environmentally responsible movement has flourished in America. Smith’s works bring this social and political movement into the realm of fiction, adding both to the canon of southern literature devoted to spirituality as well as the canon of environmental literature of modern America.

It is in Rash's fiction, however, that we are offered a more postmodern and fragmented view of religious institutionalism. He redefines spiritual connection through, as Smith does, the natural world. Unlike Smith, however, Rash views this connection as tenuous at best. The river in Rash's fiction is certainly characterized in deific terms, but this divinity is often impersonal, ambiguous, and indifferent. And the religious community in "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth" is the epitome of postmodern religious performativity. Through these texts Rash warns us against exactly what Wilfred Smith laments in his text—the dangers of placing the institution above the spiritual, the problems inherent in finding spiritual connection through outmoded and commercialized religious spaces, and the need for a new and more personalized spirituality in this postmodern South.

While this project examines how three southern authors see religion and spirituality functioning in their fictitious communities, it raises more questions about whether the statements made by these authors reflect trends in contemporary southern religious thought. How accurately do the communities in these texts reflect current religious communities across the contemporary South? How are religious communities across the South responding to the needs and shortcomings these authors are pointing out in their fictitious religious landscapes? This project certainly opens up more discussion on these and other religious and sociological questions.

And so, I contend that these authors take to task the pictures of religious narratives found in previous authors concerned with spirituality; indeed, the religious spaces of earlier southern authors look different than those proposed by Kenan, Smith,

and Rash. They paint a different picture of spirituality and warn against the reductive and marginalizing potential found in placing too much importance on religious institution as the most successful spaces for spiritual fulfillment. I end with a particularly insightful and humorous quotation from Wilfred Smith: “A Christian who takes God seriously must surely recognize that God does not give a fig for Christianity. God is concerned with people, not with things” (127). It is indeed these Christians with whom these authors are trying to connect. Their message is one of inclusion, expansion, and open-endedness; search, they say, for the spiritual rather than the religious, because religion as an institution is increasingly unsuccessful as a means of spiritual fulfillment in the modern South. The Bible Belt must loosen, they say, in order for contemporary southerners to breathe easy in the search for the spirit.

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