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Sara Waller March 28, 2022

Locating Power and Redemption in Evangelical Communities: Reading the Preacher's Wife and Daughter in Contemporary Southern Women's Fiction

by

Sara Waller

Dr. Joonna Trapp
Adviser

Department of English

Dr. Joonna Trapp

Adviser

Dr. Barbara Ladd

Committee Member

Dr. Michelle Gordon

Committee Member

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Abstract

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Preachers hold immense power in Southern evangelical communities and thus become significant literary subjects and objects of scholarly attention, however little attention is paid to their wives and daughters, the first fatalities of their religious power. This thesis considers Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, Sheri Reynolds' *The Rapture of Canaan*, and Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* as feminist texts which expose the corrupted power at work in the household of the preacher while also exploring how their female protagonists find redemption and healing from the violence that results. I examine how the women and girls of these texts make meaning and cultivate mother-daughter relationships as a space for restoration. Firstly, focusing upon girlhood and coming of age for preachers' daughters, I reveal how preachers control the knowledge that their daughters have access to, which girls respond to in varying manners. Next, I study how preacher characters construct false narratives about their wives, portraying them as inherently sinful and in need of saving, and how preachers' wives engage in counter-narrative to resist the control of their husbands. Finally, I locate these discussions of coming of age and marital strife in the context of war trauma, as each preacher uses violence to make meaning of the world they returned to after fighting in war. Trauma is thus circulatory in the preacher's household, and the only way forward is through feminine connection and narrative.

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Introduction

Southern life and the literature that reflects it boasts a cast of characters that are eccentric but sincere as they manage the tension between regional traditions and a rapidly changing world. Cultural critic H.L. Mencken epitomized the South as a "cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodists, snake charmers, phony real estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists" (qtd. in Ketchin xi). While his wholesale condemnation of the South fails to represent Southern individuals and communities who resist stereotypes, his famous words accurately pinpoint the cultural theme that courses through the lives of Southerners regardless of their own personal convictions — religion. If religion, specifically evangelical Protestantism, constitutes a central aspect of collective Southern identity, then the Southern preacher tops the hierarchy of power and authority in the communities that partake in this faith. In literature the preacher often appears as a popular caricature but not a monolith; Rosemary Magee divides the characterization of the Southern preacher into the country preacher, the prophet-evangelist, and the educated minister, while G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., offers additional categories such as conman, church politician, and mystic. What each of these different literary manifestations of ministry has in common is the preacher as a locus of power in Southern religious communities.

Books like *Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction* by Douglas Alan Walrath and *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves*: *The Minister in Southern Fiction* by G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., along with Rosemary M. Magee's doctoral dissertation titled *"Ambassador of God": The Preacher in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction* spotlight the preacher as a worthy subject of literary texts and object of scholarly attention for the insight he provides into organizational leadership and religious practice in the South. In their analyses of the dramatization and satirization of ministerial characters, the preacher as a representative of the

South's reactions to modernism and secularization, and how Christian belief and practice manifest differently across the landscape under the guidance of different preacher personalities, I notice a silence. While the literary preacher in Southern literature is a niche but significant scholarly endeavor, we hear little about the women who bear and raise his children, tend to his home, pleasure him sexually, and support him emotionally — his wives — or the girls who carry his namesake and represent the intimacies of his character to his congregation — his daughters. As the family of a community leader, they occupy highly public and visible roles in their congregations, yet they come up nearly invisible in storytelling and scholarship about the Southern preacher. By focusing on the intricacies of their relationships to their preacher husbands and fathers and how this relationship uniquely impacts their development of subjecthood, the study of preachers' wives and daughters expands current articulations of power in Southern evangelicalism to include a better understanding of the women and girls who are the most familiar benefactors and fatalities of this power. Giving voice and perspective to this silence creates a more thorough, multifaceted, and empathetic knowledge of evangelical Southern culture that resists the monolithic, stereotypical view espoused by previously quoted writers like H.L. Mencken and also elaborates ways that women and girls make meaning in a world where meaning is forced upon them.

Evangelical Christianity in America has its roots in the North American Puritan movement that began in the 17th century colonial period, which stressed human sinfulness, strict observance of rules, and a divine elect. Puritan authority held women at a distance, believing them to have inherited the sins of Eve, and therefore, created strict and unattainable ideals for Christian womanhood that revolved around subordination to their husbands and the procreation of children, raised to serve God (Harris 448). Revivals that espoused these sorts of doctrines

were a huge part of the hallmark of evangelicalism in America, beginning in the 18th century with the First Great Awakening in 1730 and later John Wesley's Methodist revivals in the 1770s (Harris 450). Jane Harris, in her entry on evangelicalism for the *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, describes the shared set of theological ideas that were born from these revivals as "a stress on the individual's conversion to Christian faith, understood as a life-changing, personal, and emotional experience; a piety sustained through prayer and Bible study; an emphasis on the all-encompassing authority of the Bible; a missionary zeal for sharing the gospel; and a focus on Christ's sacrifice upon the cross as the sole means of salvation" (447). These characteristics influenced many different denominations that would consider themselves evangelical and even show up as Southern literary motifs, signifying the unique religious fervor of Southern culture.

As evangelicalism grew into the twentieth century and beyond, women's roles and spiritual conditions served as critical foundations to the apparent wellbeing of Evangelical Christendom as well as right-wing Judeo-Christian American culture. Randall Balmer, who writes a history of evangelicalism in America, contextualizes evangelical reactions to the twentieth century feminist movement through the Victorian era's idealization of female piety and the cult of domesticity. Because of the caution and contempt historically directed at women by Christian communities who "regarded [them] as temptresses, the descendants of Eve, the inheritors of a wicked, seductive sensuality," evangelicals made sure to relegate women to the home as a means of protecting their salvation, but also that of their husband and children (Balmer 74). They guaranteed this protection by idealizing women as spiritual caretakers and homemakers — "the repositories of virtue" — entirely responsible for raising their children in the ways of Christ and exerting a positive spiritual influence upon their aggressive, masculine

husbands (Balmer 76). Evangelicals saw women as "a kind of cornerstone for [American] culture at large," and their insistence on domestic purity and spiritual virtue grew fiercer and reactionary in the twentieth century as feminism became prominent and Christians grew outraged at the "moral laxity" of the new century (Balmer 79, 84). Women's submission to men continued to be passionately upheld in the writings of both evangelical men and women in response to progressive new ideas that women deserved a rightful place outside of the home and autonomy over their bodies. Evangelical reactions against modern life and emerging progressive ideologies led to the creation of a subculture that existed separately from American mainstream culture, which "provided a place of refuge for beleaguered Protestants who felt alienated from the larger society and its values" and "was marked by a fortress mentality" (Balmer 87). Although its place in American culture more broadly could be considered marginal, evangelical Protestantism became a dominant and prolific strain of Christianity in the South, contributing to a unique religious culture that would shape the lives of every individual, whether or not they identify with the faith.

Flannery O'Connor famously called the Southern United States "Christ-haunted," meaning that in spite of one's embrace or refusal to embrace Christian religion in the South, evangelical Protestantism permeates Southern culture so deeply that one cannot rid themselves of questions of salvation and righteousness (Ketchin xi). Many are familiar with the South as the "Bible Belt" of the United States, which is "a term coined by H.L. Mencken in the 1920s to describe areas of the nation dominated by belief in the literal authenticity of the Bible and accompanying puritanical mores" (Wilson 171). Southern historian Charles Reagan Wilson gives meaning to this label in his article for the first volume of the *The New Encyclopedia of Southern*

Culture, writing about the significance of scriptural authority in the region and describing cultural characteristics that any southerner will recognize:

> Preachers took it as their only text for preaching. Politicians used a campaign language spiced with references to biblical stories and quotes to illustrate their political points, and two favorite southern pastimes — storytelling and conversation — were often filled with biblical references. Writers such as O'Connor and Faulkner used biblical symbols and motifs, artists painted biblical heroes and heroines in their works, and quilters even stitched the stories as themes for their works. (Wilson 172)

This biblical literalism is taken up by Samuel S. Hill, the editor of the religion volume of *The New Encyclopedia*, as one of the four commonly held beliefs of Southern religious identity, which also include direct access to the Lord, individualistic morality, and informal worship (2). Hill argues that Southern evangelicalism takes these convictions much more seriously than any other faith tradition in the region, naming the South as "the only society in Christendom in which the evangelical family of Christians is dominant" (1). While America as a whole watched evangelicalism develop counter to mainstream culture, one could argue that evangelical Protestantism almost defines the mainstream culture of the South. Southern Christians take up this faith posture with a seriousness that makes outsiders surprised and skeptical, and while their intense devotion leads to tremendous organizational and charitable achievements in local church communities, predominant evangelical culture in the South has also created feelings of intense religious guilt in the souls of its congregations, making "millions of the southern religious . . . open . . . to the message . . . that they have fallen short and must conform their lives to God's will" (Hill 13).

Reading Southern novels that take place in the 20th century gives a glimpse into the religious culture of Southern people and communities, whether or not the text is about religion. In her book *Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity in White Southern Women's Writing*, Kathaleen E. Amende writes about the South and its religious landscapes, explaining how "after the Civil War, [the South saw] itself as a last bastion of hope in a primarily spiritual war . . . it thus defined itself as a place that . . . was definitely its own world racially, religiously, and culturally" (2). Religious identity and community permeates life as presented in Southern literature: church is a necessity whether or not one secretly does not believe; modesty is essential for how women present themselves, and different denominations have different rules regarding the amount of skin that can be shown; weekend entertainment comes in the form of fiery revivals and church meetings; and nonbelievers are held at a careful distance, their sins scorned but their potential for conversion preyed upon. At the center of these communities lies the evangelical preacher, whose words the congregation holds in high regard as they trust in his ability to properly communicate to them the messages he has received from the Lord. Rosemary M. Magee in her entry for the religion volume of the *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, writes that while Southern preachers are not a monolith, "whatever their social situation or professed beliefs, wherever they may live and work, awe and reverence accompany them. Theirs is a powerful image; it is one of authority" (136). Especially as evangelical and fundamentalist Christian communities have withdrawn from mainstream American culture, the religious authority of their preachers looks more and more like the trusted political leadership of their societies.

The pastor's family is precious to church communities as well, and because of the pedestal they are placed upon through their relationship to such an awe-inspiring and respected

leader, their behavior is held to much higher standards than others in the congregation. Emphasizing their importance, Jane Harris writes that "when searching for an ideal evangelical woman, one might look at the preacher's wife . . . some of these women never aspired to be anyone other than the wife of the man they married. Others identified marriage to a preacher as a calling in itself" (451). Just as the preacher is called to his vocation, listening to divine voices that direct him to lead lay communities towards Christian righteousness, idealized understandings of a preacher's wife interpret her marriage to be a divine call as well. The novels that I have chosen for my thesis are written from the perspectives of the wives and daughters of Southern evangelical preachers; while each have varied experiences growing up in or marrying into their churches, they all feel pressure to adhere to strict standards of modesty, demureness, and submission to the patriarch of the family. Their perspectives are revealing of the restrictive and subordinating effects of ideal Christian womanhood, yet still these women are able to exercise agency in unique and subversive ways.

In order to undertake this project, I have chosen three novels on which to focus my research: Barabara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), Sheri Reynolds *The Rapture of Canaan* (1995), Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* (1995). Each of these novels features charismatic and memorable preacher characters accompanied by families of women who waver in stages of doubt or devotion towards the patriarchs of the family and church. These women range in age from five year old daughters to matronly wives who nurture a brood of grandchildren. Their young girlhoods are shaped by questioning, exploration, and ultimately a forced growing up as they reckon with shame and fear of hell; their adulthoods often look like subservience as they fulfill the dutiful and meek expectations of a preacher's wife in Southern society, yet some find the courage to depart from the system of oppression and violence into which they married. These

novels and their similar patterns of female characterization invite questions of how the development of identity and sexual agency take shape against the backdrop of patriarchal religious control and how women can still exercise resistance while they are bound within the strict power structure of a preacher's family.

While reading these novels, I was surprised to find strikingly similar patterns of plot and characterization that allowed me to form my arguments for this paper. These patterns include the sexual ignorance of a preacher's daughter that leads to unwanted, harmful consequences; the whore transformation narrative that the preacher's wife undergoes when she meets her husband; and the war trauma experienced by the preacher before he begins his ministry that goes untreated and circulates throughout his whole family. All of the women in my novels are uniquely written individuals who come from varied backgrounds and whose stories take place in different settings. For example, Orleanna Price of *The Poisonwood Bible* finds herself deep in the Congo to assist with her husband's mission, trying to raise four daughters and help her family survive; Ninah Huff of *The Rapture of Canaan* lives in a fundamentalist commune in South Carolina and convinces her family that she is pregnant with the new Messiah; and Gracie Shepherd of *Saving Grace* evolves from preacher's daughter to preacher's wife, to adulteress and divorcé at the end of the novel, as her story begins and ends in the fictional town of Scrabble Creek, North Carolina. Across these differences, the same narrative patterns prevail, leading me to argue that the representations of preachers' wives and daughters in Southern fiction are worthy objects of scholarly attention and can reveal the true nature of religious power structures in Southern society.

The first pattern I mentioned above which shows up in each of my chosen texts is the sexual ignorance of a preacher's daughter that leads to disastrous effects. Because of the nature

of evangelical Christianity, sex education and any sort of sexual discourse is strictly off limits for the daughters of Christian families, especially that of a preacher. Because of their lack of knowledge about sex, the daughters in my novels find themselves in dangerous situations that they might have been able to avoid had they been taught about their bodies and sexualities. Gracie is a victim of repeated sexual abuse at the hands of her adult half brother when she is only fourteen, and for the entirety of this relationship she remains deeply confused and ashamed about the pleasure she feels from these interactions mixed with the belief that she is a sinner. Ninah finds herself pregnant with the child of her prayer partner, who is technically her nephew by marriage, but during the beginning of their sexual affair she firmly believes that these encounters are a sort of spiritual communion with Jesus himself. This pattern shows up in a less extreme way in *The Poisonwood Bible* when Rachel, the eldest Price daughter, is left alone with an older man who kisses her, confirming her family's suspicions of his ill intentions. The girls' misunderstandings of bodily autonomy and sexual relationships leaves them powerless and preyed upon, and their strong, protective preacher fathers (or grandfathers) are useless in these situations.

Another recurring theme in the novels I study is the whore transformation narrative undertaken by the preachers' wives at the time they marry. While none of the preacher's wife characters in these novels were actual prostitutes, and really were not outstandingly open with their sexuality, any sort of immodesty they exhibited was scrutinized by their husbands and reduced to licentious behavior. Gracie's mother Fannie is referred to as a "dancing girl" to describe her before marriage, which is used as a derogatory term. Ninah's Grandpa Herman repeatedly boasts a sermon where he denounces the sins of his wife, and thanks God that she was able to enter into a holy, restorative matrimony. In *The Poisonwood Bible,* Orleanna Price found

Jesus and Nathan Price on her teenage tour of boys with whom to fool around, and in her courtship with Nathan she found herself drenched in his fiery biblical rhetoric. These narratives rely on the power of the preacher as a guiding, sinless figure, who can rescue his future wife from promiscuity and ruin and elevate her to a position of holiness-by-association.

The final frequent pattern that shows up in each novel is the inheritance of trauma, experienced first by the preacher in war and subsequently spread to his wife and daughters. In all three novels discussed above, the preacher figure was first drafted into war before he entered ministry. The participation in state-sanctioned violence and bloodshed severely traumatizes each man, and the only way they can think to process this trauma upon arriving home is by dedicating themselves wholly to God and His ministry. It is as if to atone for the lives that were lost alongside them or the lives they took that they spend the rest of their years trying to save lives the only way they know how. The untreated trauma that festers within each preacher character sometimes leads to an outward expression of violence directed towards their family. Kingsolver's Nathan Price is perhaps the best example of this, with an easily sparked anger that keeps Orleanna and their daughters on their toes, constantly in fear of being hit by their father once again. Grandpa Herman, the preacher in *The Rapture of Canaan*, fixates on punishment as a practice in his family's commune, dictating that people sleep on nettles when they experience sexual temptation or even going so far as ordering someone to sleep in a grave after he has been caught drinking alcohol. Travis Word, Gracie Shepherd's husband in *Saving Grace*, forces her to repent each time they have sex during their marriage, degrading her body through words rather than physical force. Trauma channeled into religious fervor causes the wives and daughters of these families to live in fear, not experiencing any redemptive elements of Christian doctrine and

instead having to define a new belief system for themselves, often abandoning Christianity altogether.

The prevalence of these patterns across three different novels reveals a similar aim embedded in each author's narrative agenda: to locate the function and movements of power in the household of the Southern evangelical preacher. By revealing male power in everyday acts of religious rhetoric, violence, and punishment, the authors I study criticize these abuses of power and how they manifest outside of the literary, namely in conservative Christian reactions to feminism, Civil Rights and other progressive, liberatory historical movements. Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith write from feminist perspectives, seeking to liberate their preachers' wives and daughters from the oppressive hold of male religious authority. Using the first-person perspectives of these women and girls to narrate their texts, rather than male voices, the three authors engage with feminist theorist Hélène Cixous' urging for women to write their stories. In her essay "The Laugh of The Medusa," Cixous issues a call that is answered by Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith in their creations of feminine narratives:

> It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (881)

By creating female protagonists who control their own narratives, these authors speak into a number of different silences. They ask, how do young girls come of age in hotbeds of religious power and control? How do women manage to rewrite false narratives created about them by

their husbands? What do the private origins of publicized ministerial misconduct look like? How can a leader who is supposed to emulate the love of Jesus Christ be violent?

My critical aim for this project and the reason why I am writing is to expose how a close relationship to patriarchal religious power structures harms women and girls by inhibiting their explorations of spirituality and sexuality and perpetrating physical and spiritual violence onto their bodies and souls. While exploring exaggerated archetypes and dark realities in Southern novels about Chrisianity, the patterns I have found and chosen to write about are essentially about power: the power and authority the preacher has to enforce values upon his wives and daughters, to gatekeep secular and sexual knowledge, and spread trauma throughout his home. By reading preachers' wives and daughters and bringing my attention to the power and violence inherent in the religious microsystems that carry immense social value in the evangelical South, I reveal how the Christian church, when governed by men whose authority goes unchallenged, can have a restrictive effect on women's agency. While their novels feature heinous violence and corruption at the hands of preacher characters, at their core they are still about grace, resistance, liberation, and powerful feminine relationships.

My first chapter takes Christian girlhood as its subject, investigating how the preachers of my studied novels control the knowledge their daughters have access to, and how this leads to varying responses of devotion or defiance. Specifically, I study how preacher characters freely offer the frightening knowledge of eternal damnation to their daughters while protecting them from knowing about sex, which leads to shame, manipulation, and most gravely, a loss of bodily autonomy. My second chapter turns to the preachers' wives of these novels and how like their daughters, they either disobey or conform to the expectations of their husbands and congregations. I shift from the control of knowledge to the control of narrative in this chapter,

investigating how preachers create images of their wives as sinners in need of saving, and how the women vocalize and live out counter-narratives to their husbands' ideas through subtle or dramatic acts of resistance. In my third and final chapter, I identify the circulatory nature of trauma in the preacher's household, first experienced by the preacher and then inflicted upon his wife and daughters, its origins located in war. I then focus upon how women and girls heal from this trauma, emphasizing how the female protagonists of this project lean into maternity and mother-daughter connections in order to find redemption.

At various points over the course of this project, significant questions began to arise for me as I became more deeply acquainted with the literary texts as well as the scholarship and historical context I rely on to build my analysis. I ask myself, how do women make meaning in a world where meaning is forced upon them? How do mothers and daughters show radical love, forgiveness, and redemption to each other in the face of patriarchal violence? These two very feminist questions form the backbone for my arguments of how preachers' wives and daughters navigate the boundaries of power in which they are enclosed or from which they escape. By resisting the preacher's control of knowledge and narrative, the girls and women in his family explore ways of making meaning and understanding the world that are vastly different from the close-minded and punishment-filled world of the preacher. By connecting with inner repositories of maternal love, special relationships are cultivated between mothers and daughters that powerfully resist patriarchal authority but also offer more Christ-like examples of love and forgiveness than ever was displayed by the preacher. I read these three novels as feminist texts that undermine and overthrow patriarchal religious power through literary representations of childhood rebellion, spiritual doubt, sexual desire, counter-narratives, marital separation, and mother-daughter bonds. At every turn however, I look for grace. Rather than offering a wholesale

condemnation of the Evangelical church, I seek to discover how the women and girls who are produced by this faith learn to angle themselves toward redemption, freely given to both themselves and others despite the abuses they've suffered.

Chapter 1: Coming of Age in a Preacher's Household: Preachers' Daughters and the Control of Knowledge

> "We worked hard at making Daddy look good. We politely answered the phone and took messages. We discussed his sermons and the work of the church at nearly every meal. Sometimes Mother helped him refine his analysis of a particular passage of scripture. Our entire family served as examples for the community, and we never lost sight of the fact that they were watching us."
>
> -Jacqueline Taylor, *Waiting for the Call: From Preacher's Daughter to Lesbian Mom*, 7

In her memoir quoted above, Jacqueline Taylor writes, "when I say that I grew up as a Baptist preacher's daughter in a small town in Kentucky, I always believe I've said something fundamental about my identity" (6). Her words reveal the totality of the preacher's influence in Southern communities and the effect his importance has on those closest to him. For Taylor and the protagonists of the novels I study, the identity of being a preacher's daughter seems to eclipse other significant aspects of their subjecthood. Constructing their sense of selves in such a close relationship to the power of their fathers and adjusting their behavior and self-presentation in order to make their fathers "look good" as Taylor describes perhaps provides explanation for why the preacher is studied in story and scholarship, but not his daughters if they exist. Reading literature that imagines these experiences then are critically important to achieving a fuller picture of how power operates in the evangelical South and how girlhood develops in response.

The Poisonwood Bible, *The Rapture of Canaan*, and *Saving Grace* may vary in setting, family dynamics, and in the quirks and variants of evangelicalism they represent, but each novel tells a coming of age story from the first-person perspective of a Southern preacher's daughter in the late twentieth century. Filling in the gaps and silences of more popular preacher narratives in the Southern literary canon, the women authors of these texts portray the complexities of girlhood in the household of a Southern evangelical preacher and the way their protagonists'

experiences of growing up diverges from expectations of teenage normalcy. Successfully locating commonly accepted perceptions of girlhood within a Southern evangelical context, these authors expose new layers and nuances to the understanding of girls as innocent. In her book *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth Century Popular Culture*, Ilana Nash articulates this as a "discourse of innocence that sees childhood as a phase of absence or lack — a lack of knowledge, sin, or other formulations of experience" (19). In the unique experience of being a preacher's daughter however, the girl protagonists of my novels are trusted with the knowledge of things like sin, eternal damnation, and the rapture while being protected from basic information surrounding their bodies and sexuality, which leads to them being exploited and rendered powerless at the hands of more knowledgeable figures. On the other hand, the knowledge they have been entrusted with makes for crises of faith and belief as they grapple with the deep and sinister truths taught to them. Their fathers' attempts to control the knowledge they have access to reveals the impossibilities of Christian purity and perfection, especially at a developmental stage known for experimentation, questioning, and rebellion. By first recognizing ways that preachers' daughters desperately strive for what they consider to be more ideal girlhoods, a more thorough account of the ways they react to this control of knowledge can be seen.

The Poisonwood Bible shares the first-person perspectives of the four Price sisters who accompany their father to the Congo to preach to the Kilanga community: Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May have complicated and tense relationships with one another, and varying and evolving relationships to Christianity throughout the novel. Rachel most embodies the frustration and dissatisfaction with her role as a preacher's daughter; as a self-absorbed and high maintenance seventeen year old, Rachel wants the luxury of an American teenager and grieves

the loss of this normalcy while in Kilanga. While the characterization and development of her sisters are more inward, spiritual, or intellectual, Rachel's chapters comically feature her dramatic complaints and misinterpretations of life in the Congo, and readers associate her character with some of the material items that remind her of home: the plethora of cosmetic objects that pushed her luggage over the weight limit on the flight over, her treasured hand mirror that does make it into the Congo, and the earrings and bracelet that she receives from her mother on her second birthday spent in the Congo. Unlike her younger sisters Leah and Adah, Rachel has little to no interest in defining her relationship to her family's religion, and instead expresses the woes of her life in the faith as follows: "not that a minister's daughter would ever have a chance, jeez-oh-man. No matter how much you flirt or carry on like a cool cat and roll up your skirt waistband on the bus, they still just think you're L-7. A square, in other words. Try to get a boyfriend under those conditions: believe me, your chances are dull and void" (Kingsolver 177). Rachel represents the longing to fit into the standard experience of girlhood in America, where instead she feels ostracized for her special role as a preacher's daughter. Through her striving towards teenage normalcy, the material objects that represent her quest to sever her identity from that of a preacher's daughter, and the grievances she expresses about what this identity means for her in secular social spaces, Rachel allows readers a glimpse into the stereotypes and social reception of preachers' daughters and how this identity stands in tension with mainstream understandings of teenage girlhood in America.

Gracie Shepherd, from Smith's novel *Saving Grace*, while more sympathetically written than Rachel, also illuminates how the experience of growing up a preacher's daughter is removed from typical experiences of adolescence, and her greater fundamentalist background exacerbates this tension. As her father is a traveling snake-handling preacher who relies entirely on God for

financial support, Gracie's childhood is unstable as she moves from place to place and sits through economic uncertainty with her family as her father waits for divine deliverance. While living in the fictional town of Scrabble Creek, North Carolina, Gracie is assigned to a new school at the start of seventh grade and plans "to be a girl of mystery" in order to avoid the relentless teasing from classmates about her status as the daughter of a snake-handling minister (Smith 41). She makes her first real friend, Marie, and adores her comfortable and stable lifestyle, with her dollhouse, television set, nice clothes, and after-school snacks at the table with her mother. Gracie feels constantly like she "was walking on eggs all the time, [she] had so many secrets to keep" regarding the unconventionality and extremism of her childhood, by which she was profoundly embarrassed (Smith 55). Marie shows up unexpectedly at Gracie's house right as a bloody fight erupts between Gracie's father and older brother; Marie runs away from the front door in tears after this glimpse into Gracie's reality while Gracie's father proceeds to beat her, although "when [she] finally started crying, it was not because of the whipping, it was because [she] knew that was the end of [her] friendship with Marie" (Smith 64). Gracie's short-lived friendship and her longing for a life that is not her own continue to reinforce the separatist life of a preacher's daughter.

Ninah, the young protagonist of *The Rapture of Canaan,* lives in an extreme fundamentalist family commune, lead by her Grandpa Herman, who is the founder of the Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind, a denominational mix of Baptist, Pentecostal, and Herman's own selective interpretation of biblical truth. While Ninah's family lives all together on shared land and mostly isolate themselves from the secular world, Ninah and the other children still attend school, although "[they] didn't associate much with other children in school because [they'd] been taught that regular Baptists or Methodists lived in sin, that any

little girl with britches on her legs was going straight to hell for trying to be a man, and that those children who learned their numbers off of television shows…were being damned eternally, would be cast one day into the Great Lake of Fire for worshiping technology instead of the Blessed Redeemer" (Reynolds 16). The extremist values touted by the Langston family encourage children especially to believe they are specially elected for heaven because of their unique brand of faith, whereas everyone else is destined for hell. This belief reveals a new layer of what it means to live as a preacher's daughter, reinforcing supremacy over those who believe differently.

As each of my novels demonstrate, membership in a preacher's household often leads to internalized beliefs of superiority that translate into separation from their peers in secular social groups. This external presentation is a result of their intense and rhetoric-filled private lives, led by their preacher fathers who take special care to protect and train their daughters in the beliefs and theology that matter to them. This chapter moves from the external perceptions and stereotypes of a preacher's daughter to explore the internal battles that these young protagonists navigate as they grow up in sheltered communities saturated with after-life focused conversations that depend on their ability to remain innocent and pure. I consider the control of knowledge in the preacher's household as a foundation for how girls wrestle with belief, sexuality, and family relationships. Although I focus on the girls' lack of control, knowledge, and power, I emphasize their engagement with doubt, rebellion, and disobedience as pathways that open up new possibilities for making meaning as they grow. Their processes of internalizing the knowledge entrusted to them produces a vast range of responses in each girl, wavering from intense devotion to cynical doubt and radical rebellion, planting seeds that will permanently change their relationships to the religious systems of their childhood.

Pleasing and Punishing: Strivings Toward Perfect Christian Girlhood

Being taught from a young age about the omnipotence of God and the possibility of eternal suffering, a few of the girl protagonists I study cope with this knowledge through intense religiosity and obedience that borders on obsession and self-harm. Religious devotion in the household of a preacher can easily become confused for submission to their earthly father in place of their heavenly one, and the added spiritual and religious authority on top of parental authority which their fathers possess disrupts connections with a loving dad *and* loving God. The preachers' daughters of *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Rapture of Canaan* reveal how the idea of perfect Christian girlhood fails those who strive for it when grace cannot be found; their strict obedience to paternal authority and internal turmoil over the purity of their thoughts, feelings, and desires are completely unsustainable practices and eventually give way to outright defiance as the girls grow up and attempt to recover wounded aspects of their identity. Kingsolver's protagonist Leah Price, the second oldest sister and able-bodied twin of Adah Price, desperately struggles to please both her father and her God, but the two become one power in her mind. Later in her life, she must unlearn this obsession with her father in order to connect with aspects of her childhood faith that focus on love, acceptance, and redemption. Ninah from *The Rapture of Canaan* takes the initiative to inflict physical punishment upon herself to atone for "sinful" sexual desire, and this leads to powerful self-loathing in the aftermath of sexual union and pleasure, especially as Ninah copes with the suicide of her partner, the father of her unborn child. Looking to their father or grandfather as false gods, Leah and Ninah practice a form of Christianity that values rules, punishment, and perfection, as their fathers have filtered out crucial Christ-like components of the faith like forgiveness and unconditional love. Writing about the profoundly harmful effects of these religious obsessions, Kingsolver and Reynolds

explore the implications of patriarchal control over girls, and how the obstruction of alternative knowledge and meaning impacts one's coming of age.

At fourteen, Leah Price arrives in the Congo serious and intelligent for her age, and extremely driven to please others, namely her father, whose Kilanga mission she embraces with enthusiasm and responsibility, contrary to the trepidation of her sisters. After settling into their new community, Leah helps her father plant a garden, intended by the two to be their "first African miracle" — a show of their wealth, benevolence, and knowledge to needy villagers — but actually turns out to be their first African embarrassment due to Nathan's insistence on the superiority of Georgia planting customs over the advice of locals. While planting a garden that will never grow, Nathan asks Leah a series of questions concerning God and his relationship to the land and the people of Kilanga, which Leah tries desperately to answer in a way she thinks will appease her father. As he preaches to her about seeds, labor, and capitalist gain, she wishes she could simply "bring forth all that [she] knew quickly enough to suit Father," an anxiety that demonstrates Leah's obsessive admiration for her father and how this affection is valued equally with if not higher than Leah's dedication towards God and Christianity.

In Leah's interior reflections on her father, before she begins to doubt his authority, she elevates him to God-like status, idolizing him for his power to punish and forgive her own transgressions. For example, in Leah's description of Nathan quoted below, one might think she is describing a deity or prophet had they not known the context:

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

> resides in a sinner's heart. I know that someday, when I've grown large enough in the Holy Spirit, I will have his wholehearted approval. (Kingsolver 42)

As his daughter, close enough to this source of religious authority so that her vision may be blurred, Leah perceives of her father's role in community as a messenger or conduit of God, whose life and tribulations she compares directly to Jesus, perhaps privileging Nathan's authority over that of Christ due to proximity. Her early perceptions of her father illustrate the extreme power that Nathan Price holds over the women in his family as a controlling patriarchal figure in both the systems of his family and his church community. Like the garden she plants with her father that yields no crops because of their refusal to adapt their planting methods to the African soil, Leah's devotion to Christian rules and reward is ultimately fruitless because she cannot figure out how pursue a loving Christ figure without simultaneously pursuing her violent and abusive Father, who dangles the promise of redemption and acceptance but never fully gives it to the women of his family.

The patriarch-controlled system of punishment and violence that Leah chases relentlessly as a girl loses its shroud of fatherly acceptance as she grows up and realizes that she will never win the unconditional love of her father. The family stays in the Congo long after the country achieves independence and Patrice Lumumba is elected, when it becomes well known that the Congo is a dangerous place for American missionaries. Nathan's insistence on staying put and his insatiability with increasing his conversion rates jeopardizes the safety and wellbeing of his wife and daughters', as they also lose their stipend from the Southern Baptist Mission League, leaving them without money to buy food and other necessities. Nathan's stubbornness is a turning point for the Price women that lifts them from their knees and opens their eyes to the tyranny of Nathan Price and how the religion they were following all along was one of his own

making. During this tumultuous time of survival and conflict, Leah realizes that her once beloved Father "was God with his back turned" — Nathan Price assumes the power and omnipotence of God but rather than embodying aspects of Christian theology such as advocating for the marginalized or forgiving those who have done wrong, he turns away from those who need his love. Leah's inability to differentiate between an Evangelical Baptist God and her Evangelical Baptist Preacher father dislocates her understanding of religion's function; rather than using it as a source of comfort or restoration, Leah's inclination to please a higher power creates deep confusion and emptiness that she struggles to make meaning of later in life.

When Leah flees the Congo with her mother and sisters, stricken with malaria and with no safe haven waiting for them, she is taken care of by Anatole, the schoolteacher from Kilanga and her father's old translator (who ironically did not believe in the sermons he generously translated), and romance develops between the two as they find refuge in one another during a time of political and economic instability. She ends up marrying Anatole and having four children with him, living permanently between Angola and the Congo throughout her adulthood with the exception of a few years spent in America for university. Isolated from the support of her remaining family, deprived of the greater economic security she might have enjoyed in the United States, and constantly living in fear that her husband would be targeted by the government he publicly opposed, Leah's adulthood is arduous and unforgiving despite the love she surrounds herself with from Anatole and their children. Her twin sister Adah, who grows up to be a doctor in Atlanta, Georgia, writes later in her life that Leah's "religion is . . . suffering" (Kingsolver 442). With the absence of her father as the object of her striving, she toils with the need to believe in a cause worthy of her devotion and good works. The binary structures of good and evil and reward and punishment she finds she cannot shake even when there is no God in her

heart nor prayers in her mind. She calls herself "the un-missionary . . . beginning each day on [her] knees, asking to be converted" (Kingsolver 525). A dutiful rule-follower and student, Leah takes to heart the lessons she learned as a girl but the foundations of her faith crumble once she has no master to judge her performance.

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Ninah Huff wavers between doubt and devotion during her childhood, but the primary object of her obsessive religious devotion is sexual purity and avoiding temptation. Ninah is fourteen when the book takes place, and most of her social interactions are limited to her family members as The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind is populated almost entirely by the children and grandchildren of Herman and Leila Langston. Ninah forms a close relationship with a boy her age named James who is not related to her by blood but is her sister's step-son, who has grown up in the Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind as family to Ninah. As the two grow to be teenagers, their relationship becomes more emotionally intimate with the growing tension of physical desire between Ninah and James. Unable to stop thinking about what it would be like to feel him, touch him, and be nearer to him, Ninah decides she must become hypervigilant against the threat of sexual temptation as this raises serious questions about the opportunity for her salvation. Self-mutilation being a customary form of punishment at the Church of Fire and Brimstone as a way of distracting the mind from sinful thoughts and punishing the body for sinful behavior, Ninah goes to extremes in order to ensure the purity of her soul:

> I carried a handful of clothespins to bed with me, since my mind was on everything but Heaven. I clamped them on the skin inside of my arms and on my stomach. I saved two for my nipples, and those hurt too much to bear. That night I prayed that God would guide me, would help me forget about James' mouth and his hands that I couldn't stop

> imagining. I prayed that God would cleanse me with a dose of Jesus' pain and keep my body clean and sacred just for him. (Reynolds 61)

Such strict and excruciating treatment of her body instills deep shame in Ninah, teaching her to associate sexual thoughts with pain, overriding the natural pleasant sensations of sexual exploration that are normal to feel as a teenager discovering sex and desire.

As Ninah continues to experience sexual desire she insists on disciplining her body, and while this may seem to readers as an extreme and completely useless practice, for Ninah this makes the difference between eternal salvation or damnation. Her obsession with correcting her own libido with religious imagery and rhetoric fails to purify her mind but instead produces a perception of Jesus Christ as a sexual figure, who along with James becomes the object of her desire. During an overnight youth retreat, after receiving a talk from two adults in the community about these "Teenage Temptations," Ninah has vivid dreams about Jesus:

> That night I dreamed of Jesus on the cross, on a cross in the field behind the Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind. I dreamed I was standing at my bedroom window, and Jesus was on the cross, holding a handful of azaleas for me. I dreamed I went outside in just my gown, and walked up to him. He was too nearly dead to speak, but all he had in his eyes was love for me. And I walked up to the wound in his side where he'd been stuck with a sword. I put my mouth on that wound and began drinking from it, swallowing his blood. And then the wound in his side became a mouth, kissing me back, and I could slip my tongue into the wound, feel the inside of his skin with my tongue, circle it there, tasting him. But when I looked back at Jesus, he'd turn into James. (Reynolds 72)

Rather than reading this as a perverse fantasy, something to be corrected or punished, Ninah's dream can be read as her inability to fit the expectations of a good Christian girl, instead leading to the fusion of her sexuality with her earnest desire for Jesus, as her fundamentalist community failed to empower her to either embrace sexuality or embrace a loving Jesus without focusing on religious rules. To take her confusing desire for Jesus even further, Ninah "decided to concentrate on Jesus' pain as hard as [she] could . . . [putting] sandspurs in [her] own bed and pecan shells in [her] shoes to remind [her] with every step of how Jesus had suffered. [She] cut out a picture of Jesus on the cross and taped it to the inside of [her] underwear for protection" (Reynolds 72). The immediate contact of her genitalia with an image of Christ solidifies the synthesis of desire for Jesus with desire for sex with James. Kathaleen E. Amende writes about this merging of the sacred and sexual, about how "desire . . . is a tricky thing. It cannot simply be done away with. It can, however, be sublimated, reimagined, and transferred, and for southern women, religion makes an easy transference point" (9). This aptly describes the internal turmoil that Ninah experiences as she becomes more aware of her own sexuality; because desire is stigmatized and strictly forbidden in her community, it becomes subsumed into her feverish dedication towards religious purity and perfection.

While *The Rapture of Canaan* does not follow Ninah into adulthood, it still captures the aftereffects of her religious devotion, which tries hard to strive for a loving Jesus while also striving for religious excellence and purification, a combination she finds does not mix. As Ninah engages in a cycle of self-mutilation and self-loathing, images of Jesus become affixed in her mind not to remind her of the goal of her punishment but rather the opposite. Eventually discovering the inefficacy of clothespins, sandspurs, and pecan shells, Ninah stays focused on the crucifixion for how it symbolizes forgiveness, love, and restoration. Her dream encounter with

the cross is perhaps also an embrace with Jesus in search of redemption for the pain and violence she has willingly put herself through, a redemption which she offers to others in Fire and Brimstone as she breaks archaic rules and imagines new ways of living together as a church community.

Doubt and Disobedience as Meaning Making

While some girls aim for purity and perfection, others engage with childhood rebellion and religious doubt in an attempt to challenge and question the truths that have been provided by their fathers. Adah Price and Gracie Shepherd are preachers' daughters who no matter how hard they try, cannot find it in them to feel any spiritual connection to the Christian God that their fathers passionately preach about. Ninah Huff, despite periods of intense religious devotion, questions the biblical teachings of her grandfather and flouts his religious authority, especially by indulging her own sexual desires. Leah Price, although she can be considered the paradigm of good Christian girlhood at one point, defies her father by challenging his teachings, especially those relating to women's roles. These girls break rules and subvert their fathers' expectations as a way of pushing the limits of the knowledge to which they have access. By indulging their curiosities about sex, gender roles, salvation, and religious power, they ask themselves, what else could be true? For the girls who become women in the span of their novels — Leah, Adah, and Gracie — the impacts of religious control persist as they feel lost coping with the uncertainty of their beliefs. However, in their childhood waywardness and spiritual wandering, these girls challenge the idea that religious experience in the South is one of "limited options" as Samuel S. Hill proclaims (2). By situating Christian identity in the curious, adventuresome, and rebellious spirits of young girls, these authors seek to reallocate power and authority in Southern evangelical communities from the dominant structures of male leadership and knowledge,

asserting that even teenage girls are important enough to articulate new or alternative meanings of Christian truth and communicate these truths to others.

Adah Price from *The Poisonwood Bible* decides from a very young age that she doesn't believe in God. Her skepticism is just another quality that makes her vastly different from her twin sister Leah, the first being the functionality of their bodies. Adah was "born with half [her] brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap," which causes the right side of her body to drag behind the left and means that Adah rarely speaks as a child (Kingsolver 33). Her silence she uses to her advantage; because no one expects her to verbalize her personality — one she might have to fabricate in order to please her father — she is able to withdraw into her own world, where she reads, writes, and draws in an attempt to make meaning (Kingsolver 34). Her retreat is motivated by a Sunday School incident from when she was just a child, when she was told that "a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo rather than say, north Georgia where she could attend church regularly," and she refused to support the idea that "admission to heaven is gained by the luck of the draw" (Kingsolver 171). Adah changes her mind about God in this moment, choosing disbelief if it means that maybe her worldview might be more inclusive than the one she has been taught. A deeply interior observer, Adah is *The Poisonwood Bible*'s intellectual and philosophical voice of reason, cynically narrating the pompousness and hypocrisy of her father and the mishaps of her sisters. While Adah's rejection of her father's religion certainly serves her as it makes room for intellectual exploration and a more compassionate view of humanity, her inability to rid herself of the language of sin, salvation, and depravity reveals the overwhelming power of male religious control.

Just as Leah's later disillusionment with Christianity creates a vacuum in the place of her hero, Adah's early rejection of Christian belief reveals to her that there are no heroes or idols — her disbelief is steeped in the idea that she is unworthy of salvation, either from God or her father, or more importantly to Adah, her mother. An incident in the Congo confirms this belief when swarms of fire ants overtake the village, forcing families out of their homes and into the river during the middle of the night. As Orleanna carries Ruth May, the youngest Price sister, through stampedes of people running to make it to safety, Adah cannot keep up because of her limp and is left behind by her mother, who does not have the capacity to help both daughters to safety. This is a turning point for Adah and how she conceives of her own salvation, as she wonders "is it evil to look at your child, then heft something else in your arms and turn away . . . I should have been devoured in my bed, for all I seem to be worth" (Kingsolver 305). Adah internalizes her mother's choice as a divine judgment on her own worth, and from then on "that night marks [her] life's dark center, the moment when growing up ended and the long downward slope towards death began" (Kingsolver 306). Despite her rejection of belief, the oppressive, constant language of Christian binary ideas of salvation takes from Adah an enjoyable adolescence as she must consider from a very young age her fate in the afterlife. Adah spends decades wondering if anyone cares enough to save her, and her prolonged inability to accept herself or forgive others reinforces the crippling effect of a powerful and violent patriarchal figure who assumes religious and spiritual authority. Her years of feeling worthless are significant and the recognition that she is an inheritor of father's sins, fears, and shame is still a crucial part of her development, but Adah's girlhood years also demonstrate the power girls have to express more liberatory understandings of the world by rejecting tradition, misogyny, and bigotry.

As an adult, Adah becomes a successful doctor poet, a career and hobby combination she hopes to achieve as a child, that builds off of the scientific and linguistic curiosity of her girlhood. When Adah finds out in Sunday School that her father's adaptation of Christianity favors only a select few — the white, able-bodied, and American born — she spends her youth creating languages and meanings that probe alterity, attempting to move towards a more inclusive and open worldview. A trademark of Adah's chapters in the novel is her inclination to read and write words backwards; her reasoning for doing so is that "it is a different book, back to front, and you can learn new things from it" (Kingsolver 57). In all of her chapters she composes words, names, and sentences forwards and backwards, inviting readers to discover with her different meanings for things we thought we knew. For Adah, these discoveries are critically important to how she understands and deconstructs salvation, since the limiting truths she had been taught ruled her soul irredeemable because of the afflictions of her body. It is not until in her adulthood when a neurologist helps to restore mobility to both sides of her body that Adah understands her former functional differences as an asset, claiming wholeness and worthiness for her body and soul not in spite of her "afflictions" but because of them.

Adah's posture of discovery leads to keen observations of people and nature as well. While her father looks down condescendingly upon Kilanga villagers as savages, pagans, or helpless souls in need of a white savior, Adah approaches her new community with the perspective of an objective and curious ethnographer, appreciating the labor, resilience, and resourcefulness of the villagers, as well as the wonders of nature in the Congo (Kingsolver 137). Her field notes lead to the conclusion that in Kilanga, "bodily damage is more or less considered to be a by-product of living, not a disgrace" (Kingsolver 72). Her understanding of disability as valuable, inevitable, and culturally rather than biologically made, serves as the foundation for

Adah's own set of medical and scientific ethics when she later grows up to become a doctor and researcher. Adah's vision of humanity is at once scientific and poetic; with the absence of restrictive religious morals, she sees people as they are, affording dignity to the sick, disabled, and marginalized by acknowledging their inherent value rather than opportunities for cures and solutions. Unlike Nathan, Adah never assumes the authority to offer salvation to others, yet by reaching for knowledge and meaning outside of his religion, her non-believer's belief system is far more Christ-like, radically redemptive, and empowering than her father's ever was.

Gracie Shepherd of Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* is the eleventh child of snake-handling preacher Virgil Shepherd, a vehement believer, biblical interpreter, and anointed messenger of God. Gracie declares her disbelief as if it is something she was born with; on the very first page of her narrative she confesses, "I am and always have been contentious and ornery, full of fear and doubt in a family of believers" (Smith 3). While her distrust of religion comes naturally, her reckoning with the knowledge provided to her produces feelings of alienation, shame, and defense as she navigates gut feelings and intuitions about spirituality and religion which happen to misalign with that of her powerful father. As aforementioned, Gracie's childhood is full of economic uncertainty due to her father's fool hearted belief that God would take care of the family and any reliance on worldly, external forms of support would betray divine trust. As a result, Gracie is lonely and anxious, resentful of her father's religion for how it endangers the family and isolates them from comfort and company. Gracie writes, "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 in tents and old school buses and what have you" (Smith 4). Her feelings of doubt and her inability to subscribe to a Christian belief system are directly related to her desires for a more normal life, one that is safer and more secure than that of a preacher's daughter. Gracie

desires love and company more than she desires religion, however it is religious doubt that distances her from experiencing close love and intimacy with her family, and other people whom she loves that are believers. Still, Gracie sticks to her convictions despite the loneliness, guilt, and angst they cause for her; her willfulness as a girl to defy God and her father is perhaps an early indicator of the boldness she shows in her adult life that lead her to resist expectations of a preacher's wife and make decisions that change her life drastically, ultimately leading to a return to Scrabble Creek where she finds redemption through writing her story.

Gracie is audacious and full of might in her attempts to chase away a God who threatens all that is good and safe in her world. When witnessing her mother, overcome by the holy spirit, handling hot coals during an ecstatic moment of worship, Gracie is ordered to pray but rather "was banging [her] head on the floor and saying, 'I hate Jesus! I hate Jesus!' over and over" (Smith 26). As she repudiates and condemns this powerful omnipotent force whom she is expected to love and serve, she not only resists religious belief and practice but vocalizes the possibility of alternative meaning. In her community, it was impossible to accept someone who hated Jesus, but Gracie begs to know what it would be like for Jesus not to be in her life; a devastating possibility for some, in Gracie's young mind she perceives of this absence as a guarantee of her family's safety and their closeness to her. Once at an overnight camp meeting, Gracie is awakened and informed that she had been possessed by the spirit while asleep, which sparks her vehement denial. Of this incident Gracie writes, "I did not want those people to look at me funny. 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 of Jesus Name Church. 'Just leave me alone,' I prayed, for I was scared to death" (Smith 107). In her fierce rejection of the spirit, Gracie feels compelled to speak

directly to God to ensure that she will be safe from the holy spirit in the future. While speaking to God through prayer was encouraged in the Jesus Name Church (although not an activity in which Gracie was inclined to participate), giving him orders would have certainly been considered blasphemy. Gracie assumes authority in this moment which rivals that of her preacher father; daring to take control of knowledge, rules, and expectations sets a precedent for Gracie as a grown woman. Her adulthood is certainly tumultuous as she grapples with the lingering effects of her father's control and abuse, but the curiosity and doubt Gracie engages with as a child continues to show up, leading her to radical change and redemption as she guides herself to new and different meanings and experiences.

As discussed in the previous section, Ninah Huff is a devoted follower of her family's religion and becomes determined to avoid sexual sin by repeated acts of bodily mutilation, which leads to self-loathing as Ninah views her burgeoning sexuality as reprehensible rather than relishing in it as a pleasurable part of growing up. The failure of her self-inflicted punishments expose how Grandpa Herman's legalistic rules for Fire and Brimstone, which Sheri Reynolds based off of medieval law codes, lack power against people's natural desires and curiosities to act differently. After Ninah's attraction for James grows the more time she spends with him, and seems to only multiply as she tries to stop it, the two have sex for the first time during a private prayer session where they feel God telling them to act as "holy conduits" for each other (Reynolds 121). Believing their urges in this moment to come directly from God, their prayer culminates in sexual union. Wholeheartedly understanding their act as spiritual, Ninah describes it in completely non-sexual terms; she writes, "then God spoke. Really fast. And then I knew him like I'd never known him before" (Reynolds 122). Her sexual and sacred union with James undermines the knowledge (or lack thereof) she receives from her grandfather's teachings, who

presents the two as binary forces: in Fire and Brimstone, you cannot be holy in the eyes of God/Grandpa Herman if you have extramarital sex, and vice versa. However, in freely employing the language of Christian prayer to describe intercourse and orgasm, Ninah creates an alternative way of knowing the relationship between sex and spirituality, which for her are commingling forces.

Ninah's movement towards disbelief, doubt, and rebellion stems from the pleasure and spiritual fulfillment she finds in relationships and experiences she once knew as sinful. Her pregnancy is a critical time for the deconstruction of harmful beliefs, and by questioning Herman's truths, she creates opportunities for healing from old habits of self-mutilation and loathing. As her baby grows in her belly, she learns to respect and love her body for the new life it carries. Although James' suicide and her isolation from family while she carries the baby to term makes Ninah feel lonely and hopeless, she knows that life is still worth it: "I decided I couldn't die. Not when I had a baby living in me, depending on me, a baby who could change things. I knew there was something inside me that could imagine a different world and make it so" (Reynolds 197). Because of the simultaneous experiences of spiritual and sexual completion that led to conception, Ninah continues to use language as a means of dismantling binary knowledge structures, as she articulates her pregnancy to others as divine conception — she tells her family she is "'having the child of God'" (Reynolds 185). Herman denounces this claim as "blasphemy", an interpretation based off of his understanding of sex and religion as two entirely unrelated things.

Her growing doubt in the inerrancy of Fire and Brimstone theologies becomes defiance when Grandpa Herman dunks her in a river as punishment for the sin of fornication. As she is confined to a cage, catching her breath during brief moments above the murky water, Ninah

wonders “if they’d stop if [she] repented. [She] wondered if [she] cried out or prayed aloud or begged, if that would be enough. But [she] didn’t” (Reynolds 197). Her refusal to repent is a rebellion against patriarchal religious authority that had guided her up until this point in her life; far from using self-harm as punishment, Ninah now embraces her sexuality as it helps her achieve a similarly pleasurable spiritual union, and it has created a child that Ninah envisions can bring positive change to her community. Although her pregnancy has a splintering effect for the Fire and Brimstone Church, it helps her family awaken to restrictive laws and theological interpretations that devalue their humanity. Ninah’s father finds the courage to confront Herman’s despotism after seeing his daughter do the same; a few of Ninah’s cousins stop attending church to commence a process of necessary spiritual exploration; and women in the community cut their hair for the first time, something that was previously outlawed, and find joy and freedom in controlling their appearance. In a community that has a decades-long history of absolute rule by one man, it is a fourteen year old girl who has the power to overturn archaic, restrictive ways of life through doubt and rebellion.

Leah Price rebels against a father whom she once loved more than anyone by disregarding the boundaries of traditional gender norms, which Nathan holds to be inflexible. Even in the heights of her devotion she can’t help but feel dissatisfied by the way Nathan views women; she writes, “my father says a girl who fails to marry is veering from God’s plan — that’s what he’s got against college for Adah and me, besides the wasted expense — and I’m sure what he says is true. But without college, how will I learn anything of any account to teach others?” (Kingsolver 150). When Leah advocates for herself to join the Kilanga men in an annual village hunt, the only woman to be participating, she acts in opposition of her father’s wishes, who is disgusted to see her step outside of gender boundaries in this way. When the family comes home

from the village's vote on whether or not to accept Leah as a huntress, Rachel describes Nathan's reaction, writing, "Father went crazy. We'd always wondered what would happen if we flat out disobeyed him. Now we were fixing to see. He lit out after her with his wide leather belt" (Kingsolver 340). His first attempt at violence is followed by a rejection of Leah from the folds of his faith, as "he stated that Leah was a shameful and inadequate vessel for God's will" (Kingsolver 356). Adah aptly describes Leah's rejection of feminine conventions by calling her "a tomboy who approaches housework like a cat taking a bath"; even during the phase of her life where she loved her Father most intensely, he would never offer back the same love or respect because Leah never met his expectations for traditional, submissive girlhood (Kingsolver 218). While ironically Leah turns out to be the most domestic of her sisters as a wife and mother to four boys, her religious disbelief lends itself to a complete rejection of Nathan's misogynistic views. Unlike Orleanna, Leah refuses to let domesticity conquer her, and instead she finds purpose and love tending to her family and letting them tend to her in return.

Religious Gatekeeping of Sexual Knowledge

The goal of coming of age in the household of a preacher in my chosen novels is purity. These girl protagonists, while at an age where sexual curiosity and exploration is normal and natural, lack the language to think freely about sex, knowing only that they must avoid sexual temptation because it is sinful outside the bounds of marriage. Their sexual ignorance reflects the control of knowledge from preacher to daughter, as they are not to be trusted with the knowledge of their own sexuality. This control leads to disastrous consequences as their bodies become vulnerable and their preacher fathers are powerless to protect them as they face sexual abuse and exploitation, or adolescent pregnancy. As a consequence of ignorance, bodily autonomy is

violated, as their bodies are occupied or manipulated by another which then prohibits a healthy sexual development as well as a personal ethos of sexual pleasure and agency.

The gatekeeping of sexual knowledge in the religious communities of all three novels is an accurate reflection of how conservative Christians responded to progressive sex education curriculum in the late twentieth century. Evangelical celebrity Tim LaHaye writes an open letter to Christian parents on the topic, titled "A Christian View of Radical Sex Education," in which he passionately impugns the emergence of radical sex education in schools. In response to lessons about contraception, anatomy, and sexual pleasure, he urges parents to go so far as to contact their "President, Congressman, and Senators" to have this stopped (LaHaye 78). He concludes that the creators of this education "must be driven by sadistic madness to destroy the innocence of the young people in their classrooms" (LaHaye 74). This enraged response to open sexual discourse can be an assumed perspective of the preacher fathers I study as they completely forbid sex as a topic of conversation or an object of knowledge in their households. Delores D. Liston and Regina E. Moore-Rahimi of Georgia Southern University explore how this censorship disproportionately impacts girls, especially in religious communities where female sexuality is already reviled. In their book chapter "Disputation of a Bad Reputation: Adverse Sexual Labels and the Lives of 12 Southern Women," they argue that "women and girls are taught that acceptable sexuality exists in terms of male sexuality . . . male needs and desires permeate any cultural discussion of sexual desire, whereas females are taught to silence their needs and desires" (Liston and Moore-Rahimi 212). Rather than serving to preserve their innocence, this silence around sexuality breeds trauma instead.

Gracie Shepherd is only fourteen when a young man named Lamar comes to visit her family, claiming to be Virgil Shepherd's son from another marriage. Gracie finds Lamar to be

good-looking and charming, and while he treats her with the familiarity of a brother, his behavior is flirtatious and disarming, which fills Gracie with shame and confusion as she tries to figure out her feelings for this mysterious brother/stranger figure. One day when Gracie goes to the barn to collect eggs, Lamar comes up behind her and begins groping and kissing her, taking her clothes off as she pleads with him to stop, and after he is done she struggles to understand why she has become aroused as this entire event fills her "so full of shame [she] wished [she] could die on the spot" (Smith 81). This encounter marks the beginning of Lamar's prolonged sexual exploitation of Gracie, for as long as he stays with the Shepherds. Gracie feels powerless to resist his advances because she convinces herself that "he knew me by the bad that was in me . . . I was not really a bad girl, but I had some bad in me, which Lamar could sniff out like a bird dog. It was what he was going for" (Smith 81). Gracie's experience of sexual abuse amplifies the belief that she is inherently sinful and unworthy of love or pleasure, which already was a message she had received in her fundamentalist home, but that she now applied to her body as well as her soul.

Growing up, Ninah and other children her age are not given any comprehensive education about sexual health and pleasure and instead receive cautionary sermons about avoiding sexual temptation. These conversations never employ scientific or anatomic language regarding the objects of these temptations, but rather they are referred to as "Teenage Temptations" and the children's ability to resist such impure urges sets them above and apart from the other students who attend their schools. Ninah Huff and her nephew James become prayer partners after Ninah confides in her Nanna about the confusing desire she feels towards James, and their partnership is initiated with the hope that it might lead to a courtship. While praying together, Ninah and James are overcome with desire and decide they want to become

holy conduits of God for the other, which begins with earnest prayer and ends with sexual communion. For Ninah, this is a sacred experience as much as it is sexual, and until she hears the language of fornication from another member of her congregation, she truly believes their intercourse as wholly spiritual.

While the synthesis of spiritual and sexual experience for Ninah is not a bad thing, her lack of knowledge concerning safe sex practices and contraception leads to her becoming pregnant, an event that leads to violent punishment and then isolation throughout the entire course of her pregnancy. When Ninah tries to ease the terms of her punishment by claiming her baby as divine, she is only half kidding, as she is not able to conceive of procreation in scientific terms. Because the censorship of sexual discourse is community wide, neither can her family: when Ninah's son Canaan is born, his hands are fused together as if in prayer, and her family unquestioningly takes this as proof that Canaan is indeed the new savior, conceived miraculously in Ninah's womb. Their belief in the exceptionalism of Canaan causes only discord, as he is taken from Ninah to be raised by another couple in the community, and members of the congregation fight constantly over what God is trying to tell them through Canaan. Most tragically, the knowledge that Ninah is with child creates shame so deep in James that he is driven to suicide. Had sexual desire been freely discussed and normalized in the Church of Fire and Brimstone, James might have lived to know his son. Ninah's grief over James' death is so profound that in the end of the novel, she almost chooses to kill herself and her son so that they might reconcile with James, but instead, she chooses to live in order to create a world free of shame for her son to grow up in.

This pattern is less glaring in *The Poisonwood Bible* but still shows up in subtle ways. Rachel's relationship with Eeben Axelroot, the older man who flies supplies out to the Price

family and rightfully gives all the women the creeps, can be seen as a form of exploitation made unfair by the power dynamic inherent in their age gap. Nathan Price ignores these suspicions about Axelroot, and when the village chief takes interest in Rachel as a potential wife, Nathan recruits Axelroot to pretend he already has claims on her. One day while walking in the woods together, a private moment set up by Nathan to fool the village chief, Axelroot kisses Rachel, who is 17 at the time, and instead of being able to have the awareness that this move was predatory (at least according to American standards), Rachel is glad for the kiss even though she doesn't enjoy it, because she is embarrassed by not having been kissed yet. Axelroot later is Rachel's ticket out of the Congo and he marries her when she is probably just 17 or 18, leading to a lifetime of failed marriages and disguised unhappiness for Rachel.

The control of knowledge under the guidance of their preacher fathers or grandfathers prohibits a natural exploration of their bodies and what feels pleasurable, and rather teaches them to equate desire with shame. The turmoil of their burgeoning sexualities versus their internalization of shame creates splintered identities and broken relationships that haunt them in their adult lives.

Conclusion

Literary representations of preachers' daughters in the twentieth century American South show how religious authority and control interfere with the process of meaning making during girlhood. In these novels, the autocratic preacher's control of knowledge over his daughters or granddaughters enacts crises of belief and sexuality for these young women, who are at an age where these ideas are unfixed and developing. The efforts to crystallize religious belief while suppressing sexual exploration challenge the coming of age experience for these girls, both internally and externally. These representations of girlhood come up against prevailing cultural

understandings of childhood as an era of innocence and naivete, marked by a lack of knowledge and experience. The girl protagonists of these novels show how religious life complicates this narrative as it tries to preserve the innocence of girlhood by "protecting" them from sexual knowledge and cautioning against "worldliness," while burdening them with the grave knowledge of eternality and divine judgement. Through doubt and disobedience, these girls indulge desire and curiosity to make meaning. Leah, Adah, Ninah, and Gracie are arbiters of religious belief and practice, learning redemption and resistance and modeling this to their communities, in direct opposition to patriarchal authority.

Chapter 2: "A Helper Suitable for Him": Preachers' Wives and Counter-Narratives

> "A certain woman plays a unique role in her community, a role unlike any of her neighbors, no matter if she lives in a large city or the smallest of towns. This woman lives in the spotlight, her behavior decreed, expected, even demanded to fulfill certain expectations. She is both invisible and glaringly present, her every move whispered about, observed for flaws and imperfections. She is the preacher's wife"
>
> -Cassandra King, "The Story Behind *The Sunday Wife*"

Kate Bowler begins her book about American evangelical celebrity pastors' wives by naming Genesis 2:18 as the "universal law" of Christian ministry, for "in almost every spiritual empire, there was a 'she'": the verse reads, "it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (1; Gen. 2:18). While she writes about contemporary televangelists and celebrity wives of mega-church pastors, her opening remarks aptly describe the call of any evangelical preacher's wife, to be "her husband's . . . number one helpmate, unpaid and often unsung" ("The Story Behind *The Sunday Wife"*). Alabama writer Cassandra King narrates the process of becoming and unbecoming a preacher's wife in her essay "The Making of A Preacher's Wife," located in an essay anthology about Southern women and spirituality. After receiving the news that her husband would be pastoring a church in Alabama, her mother and aunts — whom she calls "church ladies" — "swung into operation, full attack mode, supplying [her] with everything [she] needed to make it: casserole recipes, devotional books, housekeeping tips, and advice on getting along with the parsonage committee and the bishop's wife" (King 51). The training King receives leading up to her husband's position shows how the status of being a preacher's wife is more than just a marital coincidence, but a higher calling, vocational, and a treasured form of service to God/her husband. While women accept this calling with varying degrees of enthusiasm or ambivalence, they attract the undivided attention of their church

communities who pass judgment on her ability to serve her husband, church, and God, laying on the pressure for these women "to be the perfect little preacher's wife" (King 50).

Because the position of minister's wife is held in high esteem in Christian communities, instructional manual-type books have been written by preachers' wives, for preachers' wives, defining the "right" way to be married into the ministry. *The Pastor's Wife* (1950), written by Carolyn Blackwood covers every topic a preacher's wife should know about, from finances, to cosmetics, to women's ministry, all underscored by the idea that these women are "set . . . apart from the common run of women in the church" (11). The preacher's wife is essentially pedestaled by her church community, singled out as God's chosen woman for His chosen messenger. Blackwood comes up with several different titles for the preacher's wife that support this idea of being set apart — she calls her "our first lady," "the shepherdess," and "an uncrowned queen." While Blackwood writes from New Jersey, her ideas hold up as true in Southern communities, where Protestant evangelicalism is practiced by a majority and churches are the hearts of towns. She writes extensively about the social responsibilities of a preacher's wife and how she must keep her head high when faced with external criticism, but rarely does she touch on the inward identity conflicts that these wives inevitably face. She fails to write about possible spiritual doubt or marital strife that many Christian women typically experience. While she warns that preachers' wives must eradicate their own feelings of jealousy or suspicion when their husbands go out to help unmarried women (specifically those who engage in drinking and extramarital sex), she does not consider the possibility that these wives may be challenged with thoughts of infidelity or leaving their husbands. She makes the bold claim in the beginning of her book that "the minister's wife has a happier lot than any other woman," which is complicated by the preacher's wife protagonists of the novels I study, who engage in affairs,

leave their husbands, and most tragically, commit suicide in order to find a sense of escape from the rigid expectations of their life (Blackwood 11).

Kingsolver's Orleanna Price, Reynolds' Leila Langston, and Smith's Fannie and Gracie Shepherd demonstrate how trauma-informed theologies of violence, punishment, and suffering for atonement create hostile environments for women that, like their daughters, complicates and stifles their relationships with inward experiences of spiritual and sexual yearning. As Southern women, they face greater subordination to their husbands and do not see themselves represented in the authority of religious communities as "the South has been slower to abandon the traditional family structure, which is reflected in the patriarchal nature of all Southern institutions," writes Thomas R. Frazier for the *New Encyclopedia* (160). As Protestant Christian women in the latter half of the twentieth century, greater stress was placed by religious leaders on traditional expressions of femininity in response to the feminist movement; Randall Balmer describes this as "a wife who submitted abjectly to her husband and who burrowed herself ever deeper into the putative bliss of domesticity" (80).[1] As Southern preachers' wives specifically, it is their duty then to become the paradigm of these values, modeling submission, tradition, and supporting the leadership of their husbands without error, lest a member of the congregation notice their missteps. While Carolyn Blackwood celebrates how women can find personal fulfillment as the spouses of clergy, the authors for which I am arguing imagine the experiences of preachers' wives who are subjugated by violence and male control. Nathan Price, Herman Langston, Virgil Shepherd, and Travis Word enact different forms of domination in an attempt to suppress their wives' spiritual and sexual longings, and as a result these women search for different escape routes or survival strategies at these loci of power. Similar to the girls of the

[1] This quote is a summary by Randall Balmer of Marabel Morgan's 1974 book *The Total Woman*, a popular self-help book for married women, which Balmer holds up as an antithesis to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, an quintessential text for feminists at the time.

previous chapter, the women I write about must find ways to make meaning in a world where meaning is forced upon them and salvation is never promised.

Kingsolver, Smith, and Reynolds take the preacher's wife as their subject to dismount her from her pedestal, on which she is placed by congregations but also by writers like Carolyn Blackwood who assume that in submission and service, the preacher's wife will find perfect contentment. After toiling to keep her family alive, Orleanna Price leaves the Congo with her three surviving daughters and finds a new religion in Civil Rights Activism and a passion for gardening. While Leila Langston doesn't leave her husband but rather outlives him, during her marriage she finds resistance to his tyranny through storytelling and nurturing, planting seeds in Ninah that will inspire her to fundamentally change Fire and Brimstone. Gracie Word's life can be characterized by dramatic forward motion and escape,[2] first from her abusive father and then from a stifling marriage; although the affair that separates her from Travis implodes the stability of her life, it eventually leads her to seek redemption and a reunderstanding of herself at Scrabble Creek. Fannie Shepherd's marriage destroys her health and wellbeing as well as her ability to care for her children or connect with non-domestic aspects of her identity; her tragic suicide is not resistance, survival, or an empowering escape but rather reveals a preacher's abuse of power at its extreme. The complexity of these women's narratives does not fit into those described by *The Pastor's Wife* and certainly does not comply with the dominant expectations for women's conduct in the late twentieth century, however their stories are rooted in survival as these women (with the exception of Fannie) reclaim identities once conquered or subdued by controlling preacher husbands.

[2] In this chapter I will use Gracie's married surname Word to represent the different phase of her life about which I am focusing on.

Just as preachers' daughters' coming of age experiences are complicated by the control of formative developmental knowledge, preachers' wives struggle with identity, spirituality, and sexuality against the control of personal narratives by their husbands. Through sermons, recollected memories, and a lexicon of shame, the preacher husbands of these three novels construct and propagate narratives that their wives are sinful, reformed-heathen women that rely on the preacher's spiritual guidance for salvation and atonement. This quest for salvation however, forced upon the wife by her preacher husband, ultimately fails because while these preachers selectively try to take on God-like qualities of authority, judgment, and power, they fail to practice unconditional love or radical grace. These fabricated accounts become meaningless as we receive a more authentic version of who these women were before or at the time they met their husbands, either from their own written perspectives or their daughters'. Orleanna, Leila, Fannie, and Gracie entered into courtship when they were only young women or girls, engaging with their inclinations towards romance and seductive charm, which in these cases was also conveniently partnered with the allure of a higher power. Their preacher husbands however interpret these early encounters through a lens of harsh judgment and moral superiority, constructing narratives that their wives' desires and curious natures are meant to be punished and corrected. These stories are infectious, causing the wives to unquestioningly adopt a language of shame and self-loathing when thinking about or referring to themselves. In spite of their husbands' control, what seems like a miracle appears in the pages of these novels: counter-narratives, slowly taking shape and gaining traction alongside acts of violence, manipulation, shaming, and corrupted power. Just as their daughters navigate the boundaries of the controlled knowledge they have access to, the preachers' wives find ways to accept and live

out counter-narratives by survival in loyalty or leaving, and the pursuit of new forms of spiritual fulfillment and redemption.

Whore Transformation Narratives and Counter-Narratives

The control of narratives by the preacher husbands of *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Rapture of Canaan*, and *Saving Grace* is a direct reflection of how fundamentalist forms of evangelical faith have historically understood femininity and female sexuality; while these perceptions have remained in flux since evangelicalism's Puritan origins, women's morality has always been considered a matter of grave importance. Theology professor Betty A. DeBerg speaks to this concern in her book *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*:

> Women's morality was important to men also because it eased the doubts men had about their own sexuality. Norms for manliness dictated a certain sexual prowess and level of activity. Since men could not really be manly *and* preach sexual restraint, it fell to the women to be the guardians of decency. A man worried about controlling his sexual drives could place that burden on women and feel safer from the sin always lurking in him. (21)

The novels I study confirm DeBerg's arguments as the preacher characters use narratives of depraved female sexuality to assert power both inside and outside of the home. Through the stories they tell about their wives, these men are also curating an image of themselves that rivals God in order to prove their righteousness and authority to their congregations. Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith are highly cognizant of these historical articulations of women's virtue, or lack thereof, and how these views uphold patriarchal control over women. By providing sympathetic portraits of preachers' wives who defy expectations and challenge authority, these

authors provide counter-narratives that overturn dominant evangelical ideas that women must control their inherent sinfulness in order to serve as paragons of virtue in the home.

In their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, Klarissa Lueg et al. ground their analysis of narratives and counter-narratives in a discussion of power. While narratives "are instruments . . . to produce a normatively laden social order," counter-narratives are a form of resistance and "can be interpreted as creative, innovative forces fostering beneficial societal change; forces holding productive potential for progress" (Lueg et al. 4). The authors of the three texts on which I focus not only provide a counter-narrative for historical narratives of Christian femininity, but their preacher's wife characters explore possibilities for counter-narratives as well, entertaining the possibility of new meanings they can use to understand themselves in a more redemptive light. These in-text representations of counter-narratives are founded upon maternal love and restorative discourse between preacher's wife and preacher's daughter. While my next chapter understands the mother-daughter relationship in these novels as a space for both parties to heal from trauma, this section specifically investigates how dialogue between mother and daughter functions to rewrite harmful narratives that serve only the power of a violent patriarch.

Orleanna Price met her husband when she went to a revival with her girlfriends, on the lookout for boys: "We threw ourselves at Jesus with our unsaved bosoms heaving. We had already given a chance to all the other red-necked hooligans in Pearl by then, and were looking for someone who better deserved us. Well, why not Jesus? We were only in it for the short run anyhow — we assumed He would be gone by the end of the week, the same as all the others." She leaves the tent revival with "Nathan Price in [her] life instead . . . who fell upon [her] unclaimed soul like a dog on a bone" (Kingsolver 194). The wording of "instead" here is

important, as it suggests that Orleanna's original goal of finding Jesus at this revival was not met, but rather similar to Leah, Nathan Price assumes the role of spiritual and religious authority in her life and the grace of Jesus is then lacking. She is romanced by Nathan through his eloquent, biblically resonant language that charms her as he dangles the promise of spiritual purification (Kingsolver 194). She soon becomes disillusioned however when Nathan comes home from war and hits her for the first time, but not the last. She refers to herself during the time before she met Nathan as a "beautiful heathen girl," wording that indicates a controlled narrative of reformed sexual immorality as the label of heathen reflects evangelical binaries of sinfulness and purity, which Orleanna might not have called herself had not Nathan believed and repeated that narrative. Using his language demonstrates the tenacity of Nathan's influence, but the context in which she uses it is still one of questioning and deep contemplation, seeking to disentangle herself and her history from her husband's narrative.

Ideas concerning Orleanna's supposedly inherent sinfulness and sexual proclivity are evident in the way that Nathan conceives of her body during childbearing years, which creates a deep sense of shame and need for atonement in Orleanna. For example, Orleanna recollects how Nathan "was profoundly embarrassed by my pregnancies . . . each one drew God's attention anew to my having a vagina and his having a penis and the fact that we'd laid them near enough together to conceive a child . . . Nathan was made feverish by sex, and trembled afterward, praying aloud and blaming me for my wantonness" (Kingsolver 198). These acts of private prayer serve as a tool of dissemination for the false narrative that Orleanna is sexually licentious to the point of wickedness, depraved in the eyes of God. Readers can tell how Orleanna internalizes this narrative when she talks of how Adah's disability "was what God sent [her], either as punishment or reward" (Kingsolver 199). Failing to accept an accident of birth and

rather interpreting this coincidence as a consequence of her own failure to meet the expectations of a good Christian woman and preacher's wife show the disastrous effects of this controlled narrative tactic because of the contentious relationship between Adah and Orleanna that last until Adah's adulthood. Nathan's narrative of Orleanna as a reformed "heathen girl" in constant need of his saving is so overwhelming that for most of her marriage Orleanna knows nothing but stagnancy and complacency, and she doesn't fully understand the harmful extent of Nathan's control until she leaves.

Orleanna retrospectively interprets Nathan's abuse through a language of colonization and independence, which she became familiar with while living in the Congo as it wrested its independence from the hands of violent Belgian colonizers. This is an apt metaphor for her marriage, for just as literary canons and other narratives can be disseminated from the colonizer to the colonized to reinforce power and obstruct alternative ways of understanding subjecthood, Nathan's maligned narratives of Orleanna's sinful nature served to keep her subordinate to him for a number of years. She regretfully recollects how "Nathan was in full possession of the country once known as Orleanna Wharton," a conquest that did not happen overnight but rather carefully over time as Nathan created one specific way for Orleanna to know herself and her world. Orleanna's engagement with counter narrative happens slowly over time after she emancipates herself from Nathan's control, beginning with a dramatic exodus motivated by maternal love and protection for her remaining three daughters.

The development of new narratives about herself can be traced in Orleanna's first-person perspectives in the novel, where she often makes direct addresses to her lost daughter Ruth May, asking for forgiveness but also explaining how things turned out as tragically as they did. Beseechingly, she writes to Ruth May, "if you are the eyes in the trees, watching us as we walk

away from Kilanga, how will you make your judgment? Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness" (Kingsolver 385). Orleanna's pleas to her daughter's spirit are critical to forming a counter-narrative that resists ideas of incurable sinfulness and instead views her own humanity as worthy of redemption. She fills in the last gaps of her narrative when she returns to the Congo with her daughters in the last chapter, which is narrated by an omniscient Ruth May, who offers grace to her mother: "Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for as long as we both shall live I forgive you Mother" (Kingsolver 543). Orleanna's chapters in the novel at times read like a courtroom defense, and Ruth May's forgiveness to her in the end is a verdict — not guilty. This communication between grieving mother and dead daughter shows Orleanna's strength and resilience as we learn how she found the courage to leave an abusive and controlling husband, and eventually how she finds grace to counteract narratives of shame and sorrow by keeping alive the spirit and memory of her youngest daughter.

In the *Rapture of Canaan*, Herman Langston repeatedly tells the story of his wife Leila's childhood in his sermons, how she witnessed her mother engaging in an extramarital affair and did not tell, and later saw her mother kill her father and lied in court to protect her. Herman completely manipulates this narrative as a tool of propaganda for the Fire and Brimstone community, to show how even the most depraved of sinners can be saved and perhaps even elevated to the special role of being a preacher's wife. Counter to this dominant telling of the story, Leila still has sympathy for her mother and extends grace to her. She tells Ninah,

> "It's a sin to love another man when you're joined to one already. But I believe she loved him. And I believe that it must be a wonderful feeling to be loved so much by two men at the same time. I know that's probably a sin for me to even think that way, but I imagine

> that having two men willing to give you the moon would be a powerful temptation." (Reynolds 28)

Here, Leila imagines the powerful and pleasurable effects of desire that influenced her mother's actions; while she approaches these questions of desire with open curiosity and love for her mother above all else, Herman simply condemns Leila and her mother for their complicity in evil, reducing her mother to a "murderous whore" (Reynolds 11).

By sharing this story multiple times with just Ninah, Leila engages in counter-narrative by sharing a fuller and more complicated version of this sermon anecdote to her granddaughter who passionately reassures Leila that she is not a sinner for any alleged complicity in these events. In response to Ninah's claims, Leila responds that "'sin or no sin,' . . . 'I've had nettles in my bed every night'," metaphorically speaking to reference pervasive guilt that has followed her rather than literal forms of self mutilation (Reynolds 32). Ninah then resolves to herself that her grandfather "was the biggest nettle of all," showing again how it is the presence of male control that violently interrupts Leila's ability to process the event and projects notions of sin and guilt which eat away at Leila's conscience (Reynolds 32). The act of exploring this counter narrative in a feminized space — between the preacher's wife and preacher's granddaughter — opens up the possibility to question these constrictive notions of sin and guilt and explore other ways of making meaning.

Before Fannie Shepherd met her preacher husband Virgil, she felt lost and low as a widow struggling to provide for her three young children. Similar to Orleanna Price, she met Virgil while he was preaching at a revival, which she attends for entertainment and excitement but leaves having been completely seduced by a young man's fire for God. As Gracie recounts the story passed down to her about this meeting, she says that her mother "believed that Daddy

had saved her, in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was a dancing girl, actually a young widow with three little children to support . . . she was real down low when she met Daddy. She didn't care about anything, not what she did, nor what happened to her. She was mad at the whole world" (Smith 23). Like the other preachers' wives, Fannie's narrative that is constructed to reveal who she was before marrying Virgil suggests the need for salvation; while one might argue that the word "saved" here refers to circumstantial rescue from widowhood and single motherhood, it is made abundantly clear that Fannie did not choose Virgil for his ability to provide economic security for her and her children, as he is taken to jail (not for the first time), immediately after they meet. Instead, Fannie believes Virgil saved her from her sins — being a dancing girl, which implies immodesty or even forms of erotic dance, drunkenness, and going around with different "gentleman friends" whom she was not married to, as well as the desperate feelings of lowness that she believes this life produced for her ("dancing-girl").

Certainly the context and language of fundamentalist Christianity shapes Fannie's understanding of this story, because of the implied condemnation of "loose" behaviors like dancing, drinking, and sex. Her transformation, especially from this lifestyle into being a married mother, specifically a preacher's wife, can certainly be read as "salvation" in this faith context. When looking objectively at Fannie's life after being "saved," however, she is withering away mentally and physically in an unstable and often violent marriage, unable to provide for her children, and an overall anxious, miserable mess. The control of narrative continues however as Fannie interprets her destitution as spiritual failing. When Fannie hears the news of Virgil's being arrested in Tennessee, she tells her children that "'God has been testing [her]'" and "'found [her] wanting in faith'." After this she loses sleep to pray all night long. Another similar instance, at a time when Gracie fearfully notices the ghastly state of her mother's health, she overhears Fannie

telling a family friend, "'God has been testing me lately. He has been severely testing me, and I can't pass the test. I ain't got a big enough heart'" (Smith 94). Gracie helps redeem Fannie by retelling her story as an adult with nothing but love and adoration in her heart towards her mother. She says about Fannie, "if ever anybody was a real saint in the world, it was my mother," providing opposition to what Fannie says earlier about Virgil, that he is "'a precious saint of God'" (Smith 13, 53). This declaration of Fannie's sainthood, made long after her death, mirrors the process of posthumously canonizing saints in the Catholic church; for Gracie, it is an attempt to rewrite the narrative that Fannie was lacking in the eyes of God. The redemption offered from daughter to mother in *Saving Grace* resists the overbearing power of a man who withholds love and forgiveness and carves out space for new and liberating meaning with which Gracie uses to guide her narrative agenda.

Narratives and counter-narratives for Gracie Word appear differently than for the aforementioned wives, because the novel itself is Gracie's attempt at writing a counter-narrative. While Orleanna, Leila, and Fannie are married women and mothers at the onset of their novels, readers become acquainted with Gracie in her girlhood. For the former women, recollected stories about the beginning stages of their courtship and all that follows reveal how their husbands control narratives regarding their sexuality and faithfulness; Gracie's telling of her life, from childhood to her present moment of middle age, presents a more thorough account of her relationship to the power of her father and husband, and each sentence she pens is a movement towards grace and redemption. Her narrative mission is established in the opening of the novel, as she writes, "I have entered these dark woods yet again, for I've got to find out who I am and what has happened to me, so that I can understand what is happening to me now, and what is going to happen to me next" (Smith 4). In her remembering and recording, one can see different

sites where harmful narratives about Gracie are disseminated. For example, after having sex with her husband Travis, he forces Gracie to kneel and pray for forgiveness every time, denying her the pleasure and affection that typically follows orgasm. From these bedroom scenes emerges the idea that Gracie's body and sexual desire are innately evil and in need of divine correction, which is a narrative that ultimately destroys the marriage between the two. By writing her entire story from a position of curiosity rather than repentance, Gracie confronts the patriarchal power that has sought to control and shame her during every phase of her life, from preacher's daughter to preacher's wife.

For all of these women, engaging with counter-narratives is a lifelong process, as the work it takes to fully disavow themselves of their husbands' influence is absolutely grueling. Orleanna, Leila, and Gracie use conversations — real, recollected, and imagined — between mother and daughter as a discursive strategy for overriding vocabularies of sin, shame, and depravity projected onto their bodies and souls by their husbands. In order to become aware of the possibility for counter-narratives in their lives however, they must first awaken to the power which makes dominant narratives possible; through dramatic acts of separation from their husbands or quiet resistance staged inside his household, these preachers' wives live out radical alternatives to male dominance and female submission.

Leila Langston: Resistance in Loyalty

While married to an extremely controlling and punishment-minded man, Leila Langston of *The Rapture of Canaan* finds agency and grace for herself through her relationship with her granddaughter Ninah, in whom she plants seeds of doubt, open-mindedness, love, and redemption that lead to radical change for their community. Ninah grows up with an affinity for her Nanna's company and always asks her to tell stories — how her and Grandpa Herman met,

their first kiss, and as mentioned earlier, the story of Leila's mother. In this feminized space of exchanged stories, Leila helps Ninah to reimagine rules and meaning that may run counter to the extremist religious values they married or were born into. Through her nurturing and mothering, she provides an alternative space in which to teach a new generation more inclusive and loving worldviews that lead to renewal in the Fire and Brimstone community. For example, early in the novel, Leila tells Ninah about some friends of her father's who "[blew] all their money on liquor," and when Ninah points out that this is sinful, Leila replies, "'your grandpa committed that one many a time before he got religion,'" (Reynolds 3). In these instances, Leila is unafraid and sure of herself when it comes to being honest about the flaws and hypocrisy rooted within the foundations of Fire and Brimstone. Her transparency brings legalism into question in a subtle enough way that her challenges to authority are not met with punishment or exile, and instead she remains safe to encourage grace and doubt in the developing belief system of her granddaughter.

When Ninah confesses her feelings for James to her Nanna, instead of condemning her like Herman might have done, Leila makes the suggestion that the two become prayer partners. As Ninah desperately shares the feelings and urges that flood her with shame, Leila quietly reassures her that her desires are natural, which might be the first time Ninah would have received such an affirming response to her sexuality. By allowing the two to become partners, Leila helps to create a private and acceptable space for Ninah and James to be alone together and explore their desires. While the lack of comprehensive sex education has consequences that threaten the entire community, Ninah deeply loves James and does not regret having sex with him. Ninah's experience of romantic love and sexual pleasure with James would not have been possible without Leila's non-judgmental care and acceptance. Had Leila not enjoyed such a

privileged position in Fire and Brimstone as the preacher's wife, she wouldn't have the freedom to cultivate such a meaningful relationship with her granddaughter, one that promises positive change for the community as a whole.

Readers may question why Leila, unlike Orleanna and Gracie, stays with her husband, when the extremity of his rules and punishments hurts every individual in the Fire and Brimstone church. Rather than seeing her loyalty as complacency or complicity, staying married to Herman allows Leila to stay connected with her family members at Fire and Brimstone and continue to extend love and compassion to compensate for other abuses they suffer. Leila's relationship with Ninah is a core relationship of the novel, as Leila serves as a safe space and a positive role model for her granddaughter growing up in a fundamentalist faith community. The freedom she enjoys to have private conversations with Ninah about religious doubt, grace and forgiveness, sex, and pregnancy is permitted because Leila outwardly fits the image of a devoted preacher's wife. Had she chosen divorce or affair, Leila would be publicly and violently exiled from the community, and Ninah would have lost the one person who models open-mindedness, forgiveness, and empathy, values she uses as a foundation for her own acts of defiance and meaning making.

Orleanna Price and Gracie Word: Radical Acts of Separation

Contrary to Leila, Orleanna Price and Gracie Word leave their husbands, marking a huge turning point in their own personal narratives, but also making room for the experience of much needed change. Orleanna leaves Nathan for the safety of herself and her daughters after he insists upon staying in Kilanga even when the political situation in the Congo becomes too dangerous for American missionaries to continue living there. Later in her life however, she often questions why she stayed with Nathan as long as she did. For Gracie, she begins an affair with the man hired to paint her house, and when her husband and his sisters find out, she is kicked out of their

house instantly and not even permitted to see her daughters. While this separation is initially heartbreaking for Gracie, she later admits that she'd been "living a lie" while married to her husband, and even though she struggles deeply throughout middle age to find truth that is meaningful to her, she returns to Scrabble Creek alone at the end of the book, to make sense out of what has happened to her in her life.

In another instructional book for preacher's wives, called *The Pastor's Wife Today* (1981), writer Donna Sinclair dedicates a chapter to divorce, concerned with the "alarming" rates of divorce among clergy couples, and even quoting a statistic that clergymen are actually the third most divorced professional (80). She attributes the cause of this to societal changes and the increasing progressiveness of women's roles, rather than acknowledging factors like incompatibility, infidelity, or domestic violence. She then discusses the ways in which a pastor's wife struggles with the consequences of divorce, one of these being the loss of church community. This argument reinforces the idea that the preacher is the center of the church, and that no matter how beloved his wife is by the church, her imposed place on the church pedestal is always in danger of toppling. Sinclair also boldly claims that divorce from a preacher will lead to a "loss of identity" (87). While this can be true as divorce is certainly a troubling and disruptive event for most people, the women in my novels use divorce, or informal ways of leaving a marriage, as a way to free themselves from a controlling, restrictive, and sometimes abusive marriage. Rather than a loss of identity, this commences a new process of identity formation as these women learn to make meaning outside of harmful religious contexts for the first time in their adult lives.

After almost two years of desperately providing for the survival of her family while her husband was hellbent on baptizing every last soul in Kilanga, Orleanna seizes her future and the

future of her remaining daughters by leaving the Congo. While one may feel this choice was long overdue, Orleanna provides a number of reasons and reflections on why she stayed as long as she did, explaining:

> For women like me, it seems, it's not ours to take charge of beginnings and endings . . . let men write those stories. I can't. I only know the middle ground where we live our lives . . . don't dare presume there's shame in the lot of a woman who carries on . . . *conquest* and *liberation* and *democracy* and *divorce* are words that mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get out on the line and it looks like rain. (Kingsolver 383).

Against the backdrop of political turmoil and independence in the Congo, Orleanna liberates her own body, her history, and her future when she decides to leave. The propelling event of her exodus, Ruth May's death, prompts a visceral remembrance of her body's connection to her daughters through pregnancy and childbirth, something for which Nathan tried to inflict shame upon her. She writes, "a mother's body remembers her babies — the folds of soft flesh, the softly furred scalp against her nose. Each child has its own entreaties to body and soul" (Kingsolver 381). In this way, Ruth May's death sparks almost a physiological reaction that forces Orleanna's body to carry her and her other daughters out of the Congo — as she leaves without looking back, Orleanna sends out a prayer to Ruth May's spirit: "*My baby, my blood, my honest truth: entreat me not to leave thee, for whither thou goest I will go. Where I lodge, we lodge together. Where I die, you'll be buried at last*" (Kingsolver 382). The rediscoveries of truth and identity that take place in the latter half of Orleanna's life do not happen without Ruth May in her heart; she sees and hears Ruth May's spirit everywhere, but it is not until the end of her life that she makes a pilgrimage back to Ruth May's body.

Although returning to the place she left — a place her husband attempted to occupy, as he did her body and soul — she returns here with her daughters as women who have freed themselves from Nathan's terror, seeking to reunite and be redeemed by the sister they lost, although they cannot find her grave. Although Christianity in *The Poisonwood Bible*, shared and taught by a controlling father, is chewed up and spat out, ultimately deconstructed and rejected by the Price women by the time they are returning to the site of their old mission, the book ends on a note of redemption, one of the most fundamental principles of Christian belief. As forgiveness flows from daughter to mother, Kingsolver opens up and reimagines the system of faith which left permanent scars on the histories of the Price women by putting power in the hands and voices of women and locating redemption between them, rather than reserving it for the male patriarch. In the Price family, these restored connections are made possible by Orleanna leaving and taking her daughters with her, divorcing herself unofficially but permanently from the dominion of Nathan Price.

Gracie Word's experience of being married to a preacher does not seem as bleak or violent as her mother's or Orleanna's experiences, but in order to meet others' expectations, Gracie suppresses her sexual desires and limits any spiritual questioning that was desperately needed as a preacher's daughter who doubted tremendously. Travis's shame about having "a special weakness" for "desires of the flesh" impacts Gracie's sexual pleasure in marriage, and mortifies her body and her desires (Smith 168). After their wedding night, "the most awful change came over Travis Word" and he begs Gracie to get down on her knees beside him and start praying, "as he quoted from Romans about [their] sinful passions working in [their] members to bear fruit for death. He was attempting to purify" (188). Travis is serious, forlorn, and flooded with shame and guilt, and his partnership does not serve to liberate Gracie or lift her

out of the religious extremist world she was born into. Despite the trauma of her childhood she retains a sense of youthfulness and playfulness when she marries Travis, but as a controlling Christian patriarch, like Gracie's father but in different ways, he continues to quell her curiosity and desire.

Gracie has two daughters with Travis, and motherhood becomes her sort of favored religion as she loves everything to do with caring for her two girls. Of this point in her life she remembers how "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. But sometimes, something would happen to make me come up gasping for air" (Smith 195). For example, when Gracie hears from her friend DeeDee about how she wishes her husband would ease up on sex, giving her a break from the daily activity of it, she is shocked. She "could count on [her] fingers the number of times Travis and [she] actually did it in any given month," and when they did have sex, Travis became essentially motionless and withheld affection, still forcing them to pray at the end of it, which leads Gracie to discontinue her pursuit of sex with Travis (Smith 197).

Because Travis denies pleasure to Gracie, she must find it in illicit places. When given the opportunity to have an affair with a man she is attracted to, who will not force her to kneel and pray afterwards, Gracie has no trouble with this decision. She writes, "I was going to do what I was going to do long before I even knew I was going to do it" (Smith 223). After being kicked out of her home by Travis's sisters and losing full custody of her daughters, she moves in with her lover Randy Newhouse, but leaves him again when he cheats on her years later. Leaving Travis does not lead to a neat transformation, but rather begins a much longer exodus that finally concludes at Scrabble Creek as Gracie sits down to write her story. Gracie considers every

tragedy of her life as part of the engine that moves her forward, towards her namesake — grace — and away from male power and control. Joan Wylie Hall writes in her article "Redemption at Scrabble Creek in Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*" that "at Scrabble Creek, [Gracie] 'knows' herself because mother and daughter, past and present, heaven and earth are miraculously united" (96). By ending her marriage, Gracie can once again connect with her girlhood self; her homecoming and the construction of her personal narrative offers forgiveness to herself and others, something Virgil Shepherd and Travis Word failed to do when she trusted them the most.

Conclusion

The preachers' wives of my selected novels are victims of domestic abuse, slander, and shame. In both dramatic and quotidian acts of survival however, they slowly develop counter-narratives which resist the idea that they must submit to their husbands' violent authorities in order to be saved. Through separation from or strategic loyalty to their husbands, these women wrench the power of salvation from the preacher, learning to offer grace and salvation to themselves and each other through feminine spaces and discourse as well as writing. Just as conversation and redemption between mother and daughter is necessary for preachers' wives to vocalize counter-narratives, these relationships also form the foundation for trauma recovery and spiritual rebirth.

Chapter 3: Circulatory Trauma in the Household of a Preacher and Healing Through the Feminine

> "The sins of the ordained minister are publicly magnified. Clergy immorality unleashes shockwaves through a congregation, as anyone knows who has passed through a church trauma resulting from financial embezzlement or sexual abuse by the minister. Only the healthiest congregations emerge from ministerial scandal without debilitating wounds, and then only by the grace of God. Scars remain."
>
> - G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: The Minister in Southern Fiction*, 74

G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, gives necessary scrutiny to the issue of ministerial scandal, a reality of congregational life that does not discriminate by denomination or region. His book pays special attention to the South of course, and he is sensitive to the fact that "Southern writers do not indulge clergy misconduct. They reserve their sharpest barbs for the errant minister — precisely because so much is at stake" (Ramsey 74). Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith — the latter included in his study — are Southern writers who are gravely concerned with preachers who abuse their power over religious communities. Rather than focusing primarily on the public congregational implications of pastoral misdemeanors, they write to imagine the origins of this corruption: the preacher's household. I use their texts to consider how public manifestations of clerical abuse of power begin privately. When an old and maniacal Nathan Price is accused and killed by Congolese villagers for drowning a boat of children, and when the Church of Fire and Brimstone and the Jesus Name Church of God lose their followings, the corruption that is brought to light has a rather long history, known only by those domestically familiar with the preacher. Ramsey's avowal that "scars remain" is perhaps most resonant inside rather than outside the preacher's home. This chapter locates the violent and corrupt acts of power by preachers in their households

and investigates the trauma — "scars" — that impact the lives of his wives and daughters, as well as the wounds out of which these abuses of power develop.

While Christianity is based on the life of Jesus Christ, who exemplifies radical love and forgiveness, my chosen novels contain controlling male patriarchs who, at the center of their religious community (church or family, or both), propagate trauma-informed theologies of sin and punishment through violence and harsh rhetoric. Their wives and daughters are the first casualties of their physical and spiritual attacks, but the trauma that results has far-reaching origins. In all three novels, the trauma of war is an unseen but potent character, exposed through first-person narratives of women and girls who become victims once their husbands return from war. Author and critic Jonathan Hart writes in his book *Poetics of Otherness: War, Trauma, and Literature* that violence perpetrated during and after war "is a consequence of, or reaction to, that original breach we feel and make in myth. Some lash out . . . for the fall into death and sin, into the ruin and broken world after disobedience" (3). Situating war and its aftereffects in the context of the biblical "fall" can appropriately explain the enduring repercussions of war in my studied novels, as preacher-veterans respond aggressively to change and "worldliness" upon homecoming.

In his book *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right*, Christopher Douglas examines the resurgence of conservative Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century, and its responses to sexual immorality, evolution, leftist political movements, and increasing reproductive rights for women. The behavior and beliefs of the preacher characters I study align with the developing Christian Right of their time, namely in their insistence upon biblical absolutism and traditional gender roles. He writes that "while liberals, secularists, and progressives may have experienced the unexpected resurgence as an

intrusion of religion into a properly secular public sphere, conservative Christians had already experienced postwar changes in America that they deemed an intrusive pulling apart of traditional values and an external limitation on their religious freedom" (Douglas 7). The narrative pattern of the preacher's return home from war followed by violent reactions against his family members can be read as a microcosm of the postwar Christian response to progressive American developments and cultural sentiments. These preachers turn to God and Christianity for refuge from their traumatic experiences in war, and they view their wives and inherent female sexuality as manifestation of the problems that conservative Christians were locating in American culture at this time. While this was a national phenomenon, Douglas names the American South as "the intellectual and organizational base for the Religious Right," which perhaps explains the presence of ultraconservative preachers who take religion to its extreme in so many Southern novels, not only the three I've elected to study but a plethora more that are surveyed in *Preachers and Misfits*. By including war in the backstory of their preacher characters, Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith ground the violence that circulates in the preacher's household in historical reality, while also making clear that violence of any kind — state-sanctioned or domestic — has no place in Christian communities and serves only to separate women from God.

Preacher-Veterans and Homecoming Narratives

Nathan Price, Herman Langston, and Travis Word return home from war decades before the beginnings of their novels. Their experiences in war are mostly unspoken; the women and girls who tell their stories know only how the violence of war becomes domestic upon homecoming. As expected, war changes these men, and they return with newfound religious obsessions and legalistic tendencies. Violence becomes their primary method of making meaning

of the world to which they come back, and as discussed in the previous two chapters, this interferes with their wives' and daughters' abilities to know peaceful, loving alternatives.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Orleanna Price writes about the playfulness and amusement in Nathan's disposition that was lost in combat: "that was the last I would ever hear from the man I'd married — one who could laugh (even about sleeping in a manger), call me his 'honey lamb', and trust in the miracle of good fortune" (Kingsolver 196). Nathan Price returns home from fighting in World War II infected with guilt which he projects onto Orleanna and then his daughters. Orleanna recalls how "his first words to [her] were to speak of how fiercely he felt the eye of God upon him. He pulled away from [her] kiss and teasing touch, demanding, 'Can't you understand the Lord is watching us?'" (Kingsolver 197). He becomes physically violent against Orleanna for the first time after coming home, and his daughters will eventually fear his hand coming down upon them. The deep religiosity and commitment to serving God that Nathan possessed before the war turns into a sickening obsession upon his return home, and Orleanna's body and the daughters that were born from it become a target of violence and a project for purification upon which Nathan uses to process his own traumatic experience in war.

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, when Ninah asks her Nanna to tell her about one of Grandpa Herman's sins, wanting to see humanity in him, Leila retrieves a medal that Herman earned from serving in war, and very bluntly reveals to Ninah that Herman was made to kill others in combat. She explains how he was not a follower of Christ before he was drafted to serve, "but that war changed him. Made him scared. Made him want to hold onto ever thing he had with a grip so hard it could strangle a person if he weren't careful" (Reynolds 110). Herman turns to God during times of darkness and remains faithful to Him upon coming home. Leila explains how he formed Fire and Brimstone out of the fear born by war that he could lose everything dear to him;

he wanted to keep "everything that mattered to him in a space big enough for him to wrap his arms around," therefore, he built a church where he could keep his family safed and watched over (Reynolds 111). Herman sees the secular world as a threatening force to his family structure and uses fear to inform his punishment, law-making, and control. Common punishments at Fire and Brimstone include self-mutilation, public lashings, dunking in rivers, and sleeping in graves. Every individual who receives one of these punishments is permanently marked by the violence of it, violence that began in war but now circulates to young girls and unborn babies viewed as sinners.

When Gracie Shepherd of Smith's *Saving Grace* marries Travis Word, a much older preacher, he is grave, reserved, and intensely devoted to Christianity, and she finds out that like Nathan and Herman, Travis had been markedly changed by war before he met Gracie. She writes how "he would not really talk about his stint in the Navy, referring always to that time as his 'dark night of the soul,' but once he did admit that he had not only killed some Japs and witnessed some bloody and awful events, but also succumbed to the desires of the flesh, for which he was afraid he had a special weakness" (Smith 168). For Travis, the sin of murder is conflated with sins "of the flesh"; this manifests in trauma flashback-like episodes after Travis finishes having sex with Gracie and kneels to pray for their bodily sins. In these moments, might he also be praying, perhaps unconsciously, for the lives he took in service of the American state? Travis's return from war sees him marked with extreme amounts of guilt and shame, similar to Nathan Price, that he tries to convert into purity and religious perfection, projecting these needs onto Gracie as well. While Travis never physically abuses Gracie like the other preacher husbands of this study, I read his denial of her pleasure as a form of negative violence that disfigures her ability to conceive of her body or sexuality in an empowering way. His

degradation of Gracie leaves her starving for affection, love, and pleasure, for which she leaves Travis to find. While Virgil Shepherd is not explicitly revealed to be a veteran as his past is more mysterious to Gracie, his religious experiences can be seen as a longer spiritual battle, where he struggles to justify his spiritual authority in spite of his backsliding tendencies; to assert his power he resorts to physical violence or neglect towards the women and girls in his family.

Inside the preachers' households of my chosen novels, trauma is circulatory. Scarred by the bloodshed of war, Nathan, Herman, and Travis return home and cling to religion only to take it to gruesome extremes. Frightened by the sinful state of the world and feeling called to cleanse it, these preachers target their wives' and daughters' bodies, hoping to stop sin at what they view to be the source. Jonathan Hart touches on this issue when he writes that "women and children are targets because they are powerless or because they also produce more of the enemy" (26). Their bodies however become an essential site for healing to take place, as these women find restoration in maternity and close mother-daughter relationships.

Healing through Maternity

In the novels I've studied, the women protagonists are hit by their husbands or fathers, sexually abused by a half brother, and relentlessly punished and shamed for attempted explorations of their sexualities or spiritualities. In her chapter "Gender" in the Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma, Sharon Marquart argues that traumas like these further trouble the process of meaning making for women:

> Oppressed groups thus struggle to frame meanings and to make their experiences intelligible to others because they have fewer conceptual resources on hand to articulate their experiences than the powerful do . . . this difficulty stems from the hermeneutical

> marginalization to which they are subjected because they have been denied equal participation in the collective meaning-making practices of society at large. (169)

While their marriage or birth into the family of a preacher attempts to forcibly condense their worldview into one of sin or righteousness/heaven or hell, the continued reinforcement of these binaries through violence, punishment, and shame obscures their vision of alternative forms of belief or grace. Feminist Carolyn Shaffer, in her book chapter "Spiritual Techniques for Re-Powering Survivors of Sexual Assault," writes about the spiritual elements of women's recovery from sexual assault, but her ideas can be applied to the processes of healing and redemption undertaken by preachers' wives and daughters to reclaim their bodies and souls from absolutist religious control. A key idea of this recovery for Shaffer means that "[women] must reaffirm — or perhaps discover for the first time — that essential part of herself which can never be victimized, her place of power within" (Shaffer 464). In this section, I argue that my protagonists heal from trauma and reach spiritual connection with themselves through the radical love and forgiveness that is exchanged between mother and daughter in each novel.

At the end of *The Poisonwood Bible*, after the Price women have left Nathan and Kilanga, they spread apart from each other and will not all four be in the same place until they reunite in the last chapter to visit Ruth May's grave. Leah stays with Anatole while she recovers from malaria, and eventually marries him and settles down in the Congo; Rachel marries Eeben Axelroot and lives the rest of her life as a white socialite and divorcée in different African countries; and Adah and Orleanna return to Georgia together, where Adah eventually graduates from Emory Medical School. While Leah and Rachel are mostly separated from the support of blood family, Adah and Orleanna care for each other up until the end of Orleanna's life, and together they find healing in the redemption of a complicated mother-daughter relationship that

was troubled by notions of sin and punishment. As discussed in earlier chapters, Adah spends most of her childhood and adulthood feeling unsaveable as a result of her disability. Orleanna, as a result of Nathan's shame, is not terribly close with her eldest three daughters during their childhood, and she feels as if Adah specifically was sent to her as some kind of punishment, a way of thinking directly influenced by Nathan's obsessive sense of guilt. By spending intentional time with her mother and healing this relationship, Adah finally can recognize that she is inherently worth saving, and the forgiveness that she extends towards her mother for the betrayal at the riverbank she can extend to herself as well.

When Adah asks her mother about this night and their final departure from the Congo when Orleanna chooses to take Adah with her, Orleanna explains to her that "'after Ruth May you were my youngest, Adah. When push comes to shove, a mother takes care of her children from the bottom up'" (Kingsolver 444). By choosing Adah for the first time, Orleanna is able also to reconnect with her body and the attachment that it keeps for the daughters it gave birth to. It is the physical memory of mothering and the urge to continue mothering that propels Orleanna out of an abusive marriage when Ruth May dies and Orleanna marches herself and her other daughters out of the Congo. After their return to the states, Adah and Orleanna struggle to rid themselves of shame, guilt, and feelings of unworthiness even long after they have left Nathan and stopped practicing Christianity. By healing their relationship with one another however, they find grace for both themselves and each other that helps to heal their bodies and souls from the trauma inflicted upon them by their father and husband.

While Leah does not have the same relationship with her mother or even her sisters, she uses maternity to cope with the trauma of her girlhood as well, finding love and fulfillment through raising her four sons. Marriage to a political rebel does not make life easy for Leah as

her housekeeping is uprooted many times in the course of her adulthood when she is forced to move to safer territories, including a monastery at one point. Despite tumult, Leah "[wakes] up in love" every morning with a kind and gentle husband and four beloved boys. Raising children to be kind, open-minded, and compassionate is an act of undoing the harm Nathan perpetrated upon her own upbringing.

In *The Rapture of Canaan*, Leila finds ways of coping with a punishment-minded husband by cultivating a relationship with her granddaughter that values storytelling and nurturing. By sharing all kinds of stories with Ninah and affirming her identity and desires nonjudgmentally, Leila resists the tyrannical power of Fire and Brimstone by planting seeds in Ninah's mind that will encourage her to question injustice and imagine new possibilities for the future of her family. While the power of this church community is concentrated entirely within one person, a man who uses his power to limit the freedom of his family members, there are pockets of healing and grace that can be located between women of the novel who exercise agency and resistance in the face of a tyrant.

Ninah also engages with maternal love as a way of choosing life over death and love over violence. When Herman disappears from Fire and Brimstone after a stroke permanently damages his mental capacities, his family interprets this as the rapture, believing themselves to be left behind. While his family searches for him and after he is found, mania erupts as the community makes sense of the event and struggles to articulate what will happen next. Ninah slips away with her son Canaan during the chaos, having been pushed to her breaking point. Desperately wanting a different life for her son, she knows no way to do this besides suicide, hoping that this act might join her and Canaan with James in heaven. Ninah hears her Nanna's voice in her head before she attempts, telling her that "'sometimes you got to hold onto a little bit of rage'"

(Reynolds 315). This reminder returns Ninah to the safe space Leila created that sustained her during traumatizing times, and she realizes she can continue her Nanna's work, nurturing a new generation as a mother. Rather than ending her and Canaan's lives, she severs his fused hands, "killing the vine about to strangle . . . her," referring to how the community used Canaan's exceptionalism to uphold outdated harmful beliefs (Reynolds 316). In an interview with Dale Brown for the book *Conversations with American Writers*, Reynolds names this as an act of salvation, allowing the two to live more freely afterwards. By leaning into her desire to create a more grace-filled world for her son to grow up in, she wrests the power of saving from male authority, which is key to breaking the cycle of trauma and violence in the Fire and Brimstone community.

In *Saving Grace*, although Fannie Shepherd does not survive her husband like Leila or Orleanna, she is revived and redeemed through Gracie's narrative in which she extends grace, love, and unfettered childhood adoration to her mother by writing her story. Through her recollected experience of her girlhood years with her mother, Gracie gains more insight into how a woman's freedom can be restricted by her proximity to religious authority and power and can therefore extend more grace to herself for what she endures as a preacher's wife (and ex-preacher's wife). In her act of writing, she "releases her mother's silenced voice and possibly a muffled history of other silenced voices as well," argues Jacqueline Doyle in her essay "Rewriting Redemption in Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*"(284). Doyle also makes the case that Gracie's final return to Scrabble Creek is itself a rebirth, a "return to her mother . . . a 'second birth' arrived at through her own experience of motherhood" (276). Mothering resounds at Scrabble Creek, the site where Gracie seeks to understand all that has happened to her, namely the trauma and violence she experienced at the hands of her preacher father and husband. Not

only does she reconcile with her own mother, but as she explores her old home she hears a baby crying, a sonic figment of her imagination that symbolizes for Gracie her spiritual rebirth and also a call to maternity, which she answers through the act of writing. By indulging her maternal and creative powers to connect with her mother, Gracie liberates both herself and Fannie from the violent religious power that controlled their lives and separated them after Fannie's death.

Conclusion

To break the cycle of trauma in the preacher's household, which has its origins in war, preachers' wives and daughters nurture maternal bonds, which leads to rebirth and renewal. First-person narratives and writing are themselves acts of mothering because of their generative functions; Hélène Cixous describes this phenomenon when she writes, "there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (881). Fathers and husbands fail the female protagonists of this study; rather than actually offering the salvation and protection which they laud themselves for providing, these men spread trauma through violence, rhetoric, and control. Feminine relationships, located within feminine narratives, are the only way forward.

Conclusion

I take up literary preachers' wives and daughters as my subjects because their narratives reveal the impacts of religious power on female agency, located at the direct source. Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith imagine how the household of a preacher may contain scenes of oppression that are antithetical to the Christian values shared with his congregation. Despite the trauma that is bred inside household walls, each novel ends on a note of homecoming as women return to these sites, seeking change and redemption. Orleanna returns to the Congo with her daughters to try and locate the grave of Ruth May, which would have been the last location where any of them saw Nathan; Ninah chooses life over death when she takes Canaan, hands severed but humanity intact, back to where her family is gathered having critical conversations about the future of their community, of which Ninah seeks to be a part; and finally, Gracie's return to Scrabble Creek signals a spiritual rebirth, where she begins writing her story, an act of redemption for herself and her mother. Their return to these sites of trauma serves to inscribe these domestic spaces with new meaning. Once places that represented rigid feminine submission to patriarchal authority, these women and girls rewrite them as places where redemption and restoration can take place, exchanged between mother and daughter, this rewriting being the culmination of meaning making processes throughout the novels as well.

While it is hard to resist the urge to condemn when reading literary representations of the South's extreme religiosity, grace is not hard to find in these women-authored texts. Beleaguered wives finding the courage to leave abusive or restrictive marriages to carve out a better life for themselves, and young girls who are powerful enough to stand up the religious authority of their fathers certainly point to the redeeming nature of a Christian God, who is known by his believers

to deliver people out of their suffering and appoint even the most lowly members of society to high ranks of leadership.

A Note on Race

The experience of race in all three novels is uniform, as each preacher's family enjoys the privileges of whiteness in Southern society. My failure to locate a contemporary Southern novel that focuses on black women's religious experience in the home of a preacher should not be read as a neglect of this subjectivity but rather as a reflection of the lack of source material available. In writing this section, I leave my project open to the continued search for this type of novel, or to question why white women are more often the writers of the literary preachers' household. One text that can be held up in comparison, that I elected not to include in the thesis because of the time period in which it was written and the lack of feminine narrative, is Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, written in 1934 about sharecropper John Pearson in Alabama who marries a woman on his plantation named Lucy and becomes a preacher after moving to Eatonville, Florida. By examining *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as a foundational text for the intersections of Christianity and black experience in Southern Literature, one will notice the stark differences in women's religious and spiritual experiences across race and time as they appear in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* compared to my three chosen novels. Relevant to the focus of trauma and violence, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is an apt text for comparison because of how the source of trauma in the novel is state-sanctioned violence directed against black American bodies, whereas the foundational trauma of war in the other three novels is violence in service of the state, directed against "foreign" bodies. Religion becomes for women in this novel a source of refuge and hope from the violence they experience. While the novel does not feature the first person perspectives of women like the other three, Lucy, the preacher's wife of the novel, engages with religion and

spirituality openly and earnestly, knowing that direct communication with God through prayer offers a respite from racially motivated violence. Whereas Orleanna, Leila, Fannie, and Gracie, suffer and wither from their close proximity to religious authority, Lucy experiences spiritual growth and connects with her own personal strength from this experience, in spite of her husband's waywardness. Black women in America have always offered their voices on the subject of religious and spiritual experience, from Phyllis Wheatley to Alice Walker, using faith as a tool for justice and liberation. Had I chosen to give their voices the attention they deserve, especially looking for similar narratives of preachers' wives and daughters', this would be a different thesis, however one that I hope still remains a possibility.

A Preacher's Daughter from Mount Juliet, Tennessee

The final narrative of a preacher's daughter that I offer in this thesis is my own; whereas girls like Leah and Adah, Ninah, and Gracie watched their domineering fathers spread trauma-informed theologies to their families and communities, I watched my mother, the preacher, act as a model of grace, compassion, and subversive female leadership in a conservative Southern town. As an ordained elder of the Nazarene Church, a more progressive brand of evangelicalism that has ordained women since its inception, she still must confront abrasive and egotistical white male preachers who view her gender as a hindrance to her ministerial potential. I wonder, if these men treat an esteemed, accomplished female leader with such flagrant disrespect, how do they treat women and girls in the privacy of their own homes?

Kingsolver, Reynolds, and Smith use literature to speak into these kinds of hypothetical questions, which can be asked in any place where a preacher holds power. Using writing as a medium through which to explore complicated beliefs, these writers do not arrive at unequivocal positions on the functions of Evangelical faith in Southern communities but they do agree on one

thing, which my own narrative also makes abundantly clear: women and girls, and the relationships they form with one another, are beacons of hope in grace-starved places.

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