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Queering “The Misfit”: Locating a Curriculum of Place Within Flannery O’Connor’s Fundamentalist Narrator

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It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God...
Hebrews 10:31

“You can’t be queer and a fundamentalist.” That was what seemed to me a dismissive rejection of my submission by the editor of a prominent curriculum journal. The editor seemed to object to my reluctance to scathingly and utterly denounce the ideals and practices of fundamentalist Protestantism, the first and only Christian faith I have ever known. The editor doubted the relevance of my research to a curriculum studies readership in a post-9/11 world. Nevertheless, I consider fundamentalism quite relevant to curriculum studies today, and it is central to my discussion of a curriculum of place. I also assert that there are a number of people who identify as queer and fundamentalist; we write curriculum, teach schools, attend schools as students, serve as system administrators and board members, and continue to struggle to make sense of our conflicting identities.

Whenever I present my research on queer fundamentalism, invariably someone approaches me afterward. “I grew up Baptist,” or “My fundamentalist parents have just recently accepted my partner,” or “I still remember the words to the songs...” Colleagues who are both queer and fundamentalist, who are struggling with one or both, make a point to connect with me in a moment of solidarity. And while each may not be technically practicing one or both—queer or fundamentalist Christianity—each clearly felt that his or her being was to an extent both queer and fundamentalist. Identifying as queer and fundamentalist, queerly fundamental as I call it, is not uncommon; nor is it uncomplicated. My research allows me to continue to acknowledge and deconstruct complexities that may not be apparent at first glance. Despite the contradictions, then, one can indeed be queer and fundamentalist, and the complicated conversation this state of being inspires has a distinct place in both curriculum and queer studies. As a queer fundamentalist Christian, I offer an explicit critique of fundamentalism to uncover the danger of narrow thinking that binds the lives of both religious fundamentalists and those progressive thinkers who would nevertheless objectify those who practice it.

This research is relevant in a post-9/11 world in that it promotes understanding—crucial for any meaningful reconstruction of curriculum and schooling—of the convergence of fundamentalist Christian socio-political thought with corporate models of education.

Talbert (2005) sites the “rise of fundamentalisms” as a phenomena whose relation to “class, race, national, ethnic, gender and sexual oppressions” have been dramatized (and theorized) in multiple spheres, including education” (p. 3). She emphasizes “...the need for researchers and educators to closely consider, among other concerns and issues in the 21st Century, “the Christian-corporate nexus in schools...” (p. 4), an unholy alliance within the public school curriculum “that emphatically seeks to produce docile teachers, students, workers and citizens” (p. 5).

The unholy alliance between corporate interests and social conservatism is evident at multiple levels of schools and schooling: standardization, testing, sexuality education, scheduling, etc. It is evident in teachers—new and veteran—who drown in a sea of paperwork and inane minutiae in the name of accountability. Accountability is the great illusion in schooling today. Although nobody at the national, state, district, or school level has a clue as to how to effect any real change for improving schools, through slight of hand, shuffling of paper, and crunching of numbers the illusion of growth is conjured. Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18), O’Connor would have remembered, and she would have had one of her fundamentalist prophets shout it with great effect to a jaded people. By seeking to understand fundamentalist thought we might discover the heart of the bond between the religious and political Right. This essay juxtaposes O’Connor’s fundamentalist narrators and characters, particularly the Misfit she employs in multiple works, with my own fundamentalist upbringing. Incidentally, the rest of the Proverbs verse reads, but he that keepeth the law, happy is he. Complications abound, and we will speak to some of them as we go along.

So, here I am: fundamentalist queer Christian. True, I continue to negotiate how those two might work together, always faced with the question common to many women struggling with sexuality and spirituality, “Should I stay or go” (Webster, 1995, p. xv). As of now, I attend services only when I travel backward in time and place and go home, to Littleville, Alabama, to my home church—the one where I was baptized, married, and will probably be buried. Admittedly, I am as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs during the service; I look in people’s eyes, people whom I have known all my life, to see whether their gaze has changed toward me. I look at them to see if they know. My daddy is an elder at that church, which means he is not only my father, but my spiritual leader. As he does for all of his congregants, he feels a responsibility for my soul. My great fear is that if he were to find out about my life, my identity, beyond any plausible deniability—from something I have written, for example—my father would be compelled as a church leader to invoke a first century disciplinary action to bring erring Christians back into the fold. Would he withdraw fellowship (the Church of Christ term for excommunication) from me as my elder or embrace me as my daddy? The great turmoil of my life is in not knowing the answer to this question. Perhaps it is our common turmoil with which fellow fundamentalist queers really identify in my work. Perhaps it is the source of the powerful emotional tug we feel when we are dismissed by the uninformed as nonexistent as queers and fundamentalists.

I turn a queer gaze upon the South’s Biblical vision—the nature and extent of religious beliefs and practices, which Reed (1982) designates as an enduring aspect of Southern culture along with its attachment to local communities (p. 133)—and the complexity, contradictions, and violence embedded in fundamentalist thinking.

The research itself will be primarily theoretical/conceptual and will include autobiographical narrative, as well as short, anecdotal solicited narratives from those who are similarly identified. My exegesis of O'Connor's Misfit characters will open up spaces wherein incongruous identifications might breathe within the self, allowing for the disruption of and disengagement with intransigent narrowness—both in self and society. Directly stated, my objectives are:

- To continue the development of a curriculum of place by exploring the anomalous subjectivity of Southern queer fundamentalism;
- To avow, through my narrative and double consciousness as a queer-raised-fundamentalist, the profound power of fundamentalism and suggest ways to liberate self and others from its control without disavowing its spiritual discourse. To this end, I consider Flannery O'Connor's Misfit to point out fundamental intransigence within fundamentalist rhetoric and practice. In her stories, the Misfit functions to disrupt, and I recognize and acknowledge myself as Misfit, exploring ways in which this positioning might disengage one from fundamental narrowness;
- To maintain O'Connor's work as a fitting, insightful, and complex resource for the interdisciplinary, intersubjective work of curriculum studies.

I take up the paradox of identity construction and lived experiences as I reflect upon my upbringing as a member of the Church of Christ from my peculiar, queer perspective. Queer and fundamentalist Christian converge in complexities and contradictions as I consider not only the queer peculiarity of fundamentalism, but also the repercussions it has for queer identification. This topic is not a simple one, for one's faith and sexuality are inextricable from one's subjectivity; this research might seem puzzling to readers who expect to find a stringent renunciation of fundamentalist beliefs and practices; that, again, would be too simplistic an approach. However, I continue to explicitly critique narrow fundamentalist practices, which seem to me to be primarily manifest not in the daily life of individual Christians, but in organized political activity of ultra conservative groups such as the Christian Coalition. Such predatory organizations I am happy to renounce.

Queer fundamentalism is an anomalous aspect of Southernness from which to interrogate the construction of Southern identity and build conversations about progressive transformations of Southern place. I turn a queer gaze upon the South's Biblical vision—the nature and extent of religious beliefs and practices, which Reed (1982) designates as an enduring aspect of Southern culture along with its attachment to local communities (p. 133)—and the complexity, contradictions, and violence embedded in fundamentalist thinking. Within the fissures emerges grace that shatters rather than absolves traditional raced, classed, and gendered notions of Southern identity.

Disturbing fundamentalist thinking in terms of white patriarchal attitudes that constrict Southern identity opens spaces for reconstructing social and cultural consciousness and commitment in the South. To this end, I consider Flannery O'Connor's use of humor and the grotesque to point out fundamental intransigence of traditional forms of Southernness. Mary Doll (2000) observes, "Fiction is not only necessary for pedagogy, fiction is the lie that

pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human” (p. xii). I suggest that O’Connor’s fiction is the pedagogical lie that exposes, through the Biblical vision characteristic of her work, darker truths of humanity—discomfiting, violent, and grotesque.

I should point out that O’Connor’s work is not un-problematic in discussions of gender, race, class, or queerness. For the purpose of this presentation, I will illustrate using one of her fictional portrayals of a queer character. Based on both fictional depiction and personal correspondence—a significant amount is with friends who were lesbians (Wood, 2004; Cash, 2002)—her disposition toward homosexuality is that it is at best “unclean” (CW, p. 925) and at worst demonic, evil incarnate (CW, p. 1119, 1121). After Francis Marion Tarwater, protagonist of *The Violent Bear It Away*, baptizes and drowns Bishop Rayber, he heads back to the country and his prophetic vocation.

He is given a ride in a lavender and cream-colored car by a man wearing a lavender shirt and carrying a lavender handkerchief. The man drugs Tarwater, takes him into the woods and rapes him. As the man emerges, he looks “furtively about him...His delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood” (CW, p. 472). The gay-vampire-predator theme is pervasive; O’Connor later explained that the man is the personification of the devil. In order to see evil for the first time, Tarwater must experience evil physically. As Tarwater had shown no regard for Bishop’s natural life, he is subjected to the horror of evil by the worst embodiment of a Satanic predator that the author could fashion: an obviously homosexual pedophile. O’Connor reawakens Tarwater’s diluted sense of evil so that he might gain spiritual sight, yet she reduces what might have been another complex Misfit—the Man in the Lavender Suit—to a caricature. His lack of dimension exposes O’Connor’s own narrowness in this instance.

Rendering Justice to the Visible Universe

Dominant social and cultural constricting conceptions of Southern place are apparent in O’Connor’s portrayal of the South, particularly its violences and inhibitive codes of manners. One finds in O’Connor not a telling about the South as Shreve McCannon entreated Quentin Compson, but more of a telling the South. How O’Connor does not write speaks as much to me as how she does. For instance, she does not write about Southern idiom or Southern Protestants, anymore than she writes as a white woman or as representative of the middle class. By not telling about but observing and bearing witness, O’Connor is able to “render the highest possible justice to the visible universe” (MM, p. 80), Conrad’s description of the job of the fiction writer to which O’Connor repeatedly referred.⁸ The intriguing tensions of the unsaid extend the study of place by disclosing the “the terrifying threat of redemption” (Ragen, p. 202) that is palpable in the South; there is simultaneously a serendipitous locating of the South from the anagogical and a serendipitous locating of the anagogical from the South as grace and place inform each other.

In a 1955 interview with Harvey Breit, O’Connor explained the extent to which her work may be considered “Southern.” In answer to Breit’s question, “Do you think, too, that a Northerner, for example, reading and seeing this, would have as much appreciation of the people in your book, your stories, as a Southerner?,” she replied,

Yes, I think perhaps more, because he [sic] at least

wouldn't be distracted by the Southern thinking that this was a novel about the South, or a story about the South, which it is not...[A] serious novelist is in pursuit of reality. And of course when you're a Southerner and in pursuit of reality, the reality you come up with is going to have a Southern accent, but that's just an accent; it's not the essence of what you're trying to do. (CFO, p. 8)

O'Connor wrote about the region in her accent, not to illustrate the region, but to gain access to the "true country" (CFO, p. 110) for which it is an entrance. "The Georgia writer's true country is not Georgia...One uses the region in order to suggest what transcends it, that realm of mystery which is the concern of the prophets" (CFO, p. 110). Because they are not stories about the South, realities about the place emerge from the author's strategic use of accent to achieve essence; the violent blow of grace upon her characters is violence inflicted within Southern place, for example.

The anomalous South one finds in O'Connor lies in her explication of grace that is set there. Her focus was less on the South for its own sake than on grotesquerie or violence; nevertheless, a Southern accent is embedded, and, as such, contributes to the rendering of the highest possible justice to the visible—and invisible—South. Her authorial and narrator voices have Southern accents, yet she did not write in a rage, as Hobson (1983) describes, to "tell about the South." It is O'Connor's rendering that keeps me honest: I interrogate manifestations of both grace and violence because, in a just rendering of the Southern portion of the universe, both exist in tension with each other.

The shock of O'Connor's "angular Christian realism" (Wood, 2004) points out fundamental intransigence characteristic of Southernness. Her oft-cited maxim, "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures," (MM, p. 34) is the possible way to get the attention of a place of "mythic dimensions" (p. 202). The South is actually and metaphorically a place not only of mythic dimensions but also of mythic distortions, in its historical, social, and cultural constructs. It is a grotesque of freaks and misfits. In "The Fiction Writer and His Region" she writes, "The larger social context...cannot be left out by the Southern writer...the image of the South, in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged" (MM, p. 198). As Southerners—and fundamentalist Protestants, as are some of us—we not only are loud, large, startling figures—Misfits—we also have to be pummeled with startling figures from time to time to get our attention, so that we might attend to grace. O'Connor's characters, representatives of the Southern idiom that surrounded her, grab the reader and rattle him or her into engaging in larger social contexts.

In O'Connor's stories, the misfit character disrupts the scene in a forced confrontation with evil. Flannery O'Connor transitioned, for me, from being a talented author whose grotesquely humorous, complex stories had significant literary merit to one whose work crossed disciplinary boundaries as I began—subconsciously, at first—reading Hazel Motes as my daddy. Not that Daddy went around committing sins to prove that he did not believe in them; he did. Like Motes, though, Daddy, whether or not he terms it this way, believes fervently in Original Sin. Sin is real, and the devil is real in the world, and the believer is sinful and forever in the devil's clutches. From a lifetime of observing in my father what I believe to be fear and doubt

—but what could, in fact, be a number of other demons—I wonder if perhaps he, like Motes, is troubled by “the threat of a savior” (Ragen, 1989, p. 157). Perhaps, like Motes, “he does not fear being one of the lost; he dreads being one of the saved” (p. 157). O’Connor describes Motes’ determination to outrun Jesus:

Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.” (WB, p. 11)

Through my transference my father is a prophet-freak, who, states O’Connor, “is disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share his state” (MM, p. 133). Because I share my father’s state, I have my own trees from which the ragged figure moves. I am a Misfit, and I beckon the figure down. The position of Misfit is risky—one is never entirely sure of one’s footing. Yet what we must “see” is that there is grace equally in the walking on water and in the sinking. The South is haunted by the ragged figure, always in pursuit along paths of narrowness, tradition, and sameness.

Fundamentalists: Shouting and Otherwise

The South lost the Civil War in defense of an indefensible and evil institution. Yet it proved to be a blessed defeat...the South won the spiritual war by retaining its truest legacy, not the heritage of slavery and segregation and discrimination, but the Bible-centered and Christ-haunted faith that it still bequeaths to the churches and the nations as their last, best, and only true hope. (p. 11)

The Misfit occupies spaces between sin and redemption and thus presents a complexity of subjectivity that troubles truths about good and evil, right and wrong, salvation and damnation. O’Connor aligned herself with the religious intensity and commitment to the Scriptures of the Southern fundamentalists, apparent in the profoundly fundamentalist narrator in her mature work (Brinkmeyer, p. 34). Brinkmeyer credits the interplay between her Catholic authorial voice and that of her Protestant narrators as contributing to the “internally persuasive discourse” (p. 60) that runs throughout her work. O’Connor found “painful and touching and grimly comic” (p. 350) the sacramental-less Southern fundamentalist practice of salvation by “wise blood” (p. 350), yet she declared in a 1959 letter to John Hawkes, “I accept the same fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption that they do” (HB, p. 518, 350). The doctrine is that one makes his or her choice: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6: 24). Southern stories of epic proportion and mythic dimensions involve no less than good versus evil, Christ or the Devil; the struggle is in trying to decide where we truly stand.

O’Connor’s Southern fundamentalist voice works in tension with the deeply-embedded and grounding presence of her Catholicism. The privileged narrator voice is, according to Brinkmeyer, “ultimately pressured to reveal its shortcomings and limits. In this invoking and then eventual undercutting of her fundamentalist voice, O’Connor both acknowledges its profound power and liberates herself from its

control” (p. 62). This is my purpose in my fundamentalist narrative, and it is the subjective reconstruction the white South awaits—an ethical sense rooted in individual conscience, not in outer laws, such as the Ten Commandments, that may be reduced to their mere representation on a monument. In which case, the lines are often blurred as to whether the struggle over them is for the laws or for the granite on which they are carved, as Judge Roy Moore’s courtroom in Alabama attests (“Ten Commandments Judge...” CNN.com. 11/14/2003). As a Misfit who is, among many other complexities, both queer and fundamentalist subject, I acknowledge the profound power of fundamentalist discourse. Like Motes and Tarwater, it continues to influence my being; it is a force in my life. The disruptions of queer desire in tension with my fundamentalist identification position me as Misfit, inhabiting inbetween spaces wherein I see the power as I chip away at its layers of control.

As a queer fundamentalist Christian, I continue the project of claiming my queerness and continue the spiritual journey began within a fundamentalist religious framework. That journey now carries with it an explicit critique of fundamentalism to uncover the danger of narrow thinking that binds the lives of both religious fundamentalists and those progressive thinkers who would nevertheless objectify those who practice it. O’Connor’s work is centered in the life of the rural South, a site where “all that is missing [for the Catholic writer] is the practical influence of the visible Catholic Church” (1969, p. 209). It is her Catholic kinship with Protestant fundamentalist “backwoods prophets” (p. 207) that enriches both novelist and the literature of place in which he or she is embedded. She describes the relationship:

[Catholic writers in the future] will know that what has given the South her identity are those beliefs and qualities which she has absorbed from the Scriptures and from her own history of defeat and violation: a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured. (p. 209)9

Unfortunately, both sides of O’Connor’s equation are not in balance, with Southern identity shaped more by its defeat and violation, both real and suspected, than by that which it has absorbed from the Scriptures. The one has subsumed the other until, socially, culturally, and politically, historical defeatism prepossesses spirituality.

Richardson (2003) accounts for the South in his anthropological discussion of being-in-place, wherein the body organizes experience. The Christian schema, he observes, generally ascribes positive value to that which is ahead and above, negative value to that which is behind and beneath, heaven and hell, for example. Not only do these experiential coordinates value place, they also translate into time, the sinful past and glorious eternity, and influence how humans live in the present. He writes,

And does not this mean that the things of God, the sacred sphere, extend ahead while the things of men and of Satan, the profane sphere, are best put behind our backs? To be sure, circumstances, factual and mythical, distort the model, as in the American South, where the chivalrous past, lost forever in defeat, becomes more sacred than the federally mandated

future. Even the Christian schema is not straightforward. (p. 35)

The lost past becomes the present that shapes the future; thus, the sacred and profane become deferred in the perversion.

It is near impossible to tell where the cultural argument ends and the spiritual one begins in the fundamental narrowness of Southern culture and Southern religion. The irreducibility of the two becomes most apparent in political engagements. In Alabama libraries, books with gay references should be destroyed because they are reprehensible in the eyes of God: their very presence might disrupt straightness. Health textbooks in Texas should be revised to advocate sexual abstinence, with only cursory mention of other means of birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted disease. Exposing 10th graders to condoms, sponges, and pills might subvert the purity-ideal of mom and home—not to mention apple pie, if the movie *American Pie* is any indication—and sexual promiscuity is denounced as sin. Southern fundamentalists are prepared to wage war, and have, for as long as there has been Southern fundamentalism, opposed what we perceive as continued violations to white Southern culture.

Trust in the concrete begets the absolutism of seeing only in black and white—clearly right or clearly wrong; dependence upon God’s grace generates the misguided thought that we must crusade to earn it; and the knowledge of enduring evil breeds a paranoia of its lurking everywhere about us. We are left susceptible to prophets of the political kind to deliver us from that evil, confirming Doll’s prophetic statement, “Whoever controls the accepted notion of God presides over what is socially acceptable” (2000, p. 43). Since the late 1960s, God’s people have increasingly formed a conservative voting bloc that supports political agendas most in line with its own notions of Godly society. When a conservative electorate responded that “moral issues” was the chief concern in determining how it would vote (ABC News, November 3, 2004) and voted overwhelmingly (approximately 70% to 30%, on average) to both re-elect the radical George W. Bush as president and mandate heterosexual marriage in state constitutions, it reaffirmed a reliance upon God’s grace through currying His favors at the polls.

The promise of redemption weighs so heavily upon the South in proportion to our need for it. Ours is an epic warring between sin and salvation; the problem is, we have not yet decided with which side we are aligned. White Southerners are, as Hazel Motes, troubled by the thought of a savior: “He does not fear being one of the lost; he dreads being one of the saved” (Ragen, 1989, p. 157). O’Connor wrote, “The South in other words still believes that man has fallen and that he is only perfectible by God’s grace, not by his own unaided efforts” (HB, 302). Our unaided efforts are bolstered by what Brinkmeyer (1989) calls our “rational sensibilities” (p. 177); human vision is incomplete and insufficient, failing the self and self and other, and, therefore, God. Our human faith in the perfectibility of fallen man animates the Southern wave of social conservatism of the last half-century. We try to help God along by claiming His intentions of morality and preempting His grace.

In the South, “shouting fundamentalists” (MM, p. 207) witness the hand of the living God at work; it is a place where spiritual abstractions are concrete (p. 202), where the mystery is simplified so that “belief might be made believable” (p. 203). Not all fundamentalists shout, and while O’Connor depicts the supernatural

in the natural world, she does so with characters who are grotesque, in part due to the violence of their religious practice. Her prophet freaks cry out in the wilderness; O'Connor states that had she not been born Catholic, she would join a Pentecostal Holiness church, among the most charismatic of the fundamentalists (Wood, p. 30) They truly shout—sometimes in “holy” tongues. Her admiration, it seems, is for those whose beliefs consume them—body, mind, spirit—even if they are ignorant or insensitive to grace (Martin, 1968, p. 46). In a 1959 letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor describes the “wise blood” of the fundamentalist anti-sacramental working towards grace.

Wise blood has to be these people's means of grace— do it yourself religion...It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. (HB, 350)

The profound power of fundamentalism is seen in its identification with the ragged figure of the suffering Christ.

The Misfit

This Misfit exists as a loud, large startling figure that shocks other characters, and readers, into sight and insight. The Misfit is an anomalous form of Southernness who works to displace the narrowness of Southern identity. O'Connor prevents her characters from having a too deep connection with place as they do with their own righteousness. Hill (1997) notes: “For O'Connor the world, paradoxically enough, is both redeemed and ‘thrown off balance’ by the redemptive work of Christ” (p. 552). The Misfit explains this to the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard To Find.”

‘If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,’ he said and his voice had become almost a snarl. (CW, p. 152)

The world for The Misfit is off balance because of his “profoundly-felt involvement with Christ's action” (HB, p. 437). The world for him is void of humanness; we can either lose ourselves to Christ in following Him, or we subsist with the contemptible nihilism of the isolated self out of communion with humanity. The grandmother is a channel of grace for The Misfit—as he is for her—because through her claiming him as her child, she has illuminated for him humanity. O'Connor explains, “His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life” (p. 389). Therein is the paradox of redemption that O'Connor explores in stories ranging from her earliest works to those completed during her final illness; while redemption is made possible by divine action, it requires the essence of humanity. Without The Misfit, there could be no redemption, and that thought terrified him.

When O'Connor declared the South “Christ-haunted,” she presented a located people both cursed and blessed by the dead and risen Christ. White Southerners pathologically identify with Christ's suffering—his victimhood—in our service to Him. And in this is found the pathos of redemption: in the service of a suffering Christ, white

Southerners violently transgress humanity by murder, hatred, and enslavement—vexed and resentful of the moral obligation of social care and consciousness we have toward one another. It is misguided service by a displaced people, displaced by abjection, what Sibley describes as, “the urge to make separations between...’us’ and ‘them’...that is, to expel the abject” (1995, p. 8). I am reminded here of Mrs. McIntyre’s refusal of moral obligation, in O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person,” as she interrupts Father Flynn’s sacramental discourse to talk to him about “something serious!” “As far as I’m concerned,” she said and glared at him fiercely, “Christ was just another D.P.” (CS, p. 229). Mrs. McIntyre, Mr. Shortly, and “the Negro” are locked into a raced-classed-gendered triadic “collusion forever” as they witness the death of the story’s Christ figure, Mr. Guizac. White Southerners serve a D.P. as D.P.s; grace allows us to be aware of the moral obligation of communion implicit in the relationship. The movement of O’Connor’s characters toward their revelation, as they are steeped within Southern place, indicates the movement of grace within place by which humanity, and thus the essence of redemption, is illuminated: *The Mystery*.

Queering the Misfit: An Autobiographical Narrative

I look back now, ever vigilant of the veil of Southern nostalgia that casts a shadow on memory—even queer memory. John Howard (2003) calls for the recalling of queer memory in order to chronicle and understand rural queer histories; for this project I wanted to capture images theorizable to the Misfit theme. The choice was therefore clear: in a discussion of the capacity of the Misfit to disrupt fundamentalist thought, a fitting place to begin is the place where this thinking was watered and cultivated. I would go to church, and through Misfitting queer memory, attempt to rend the veil.

In the 1980s a very industrious and zealous family, the Smiths, moved into the neighborhood and began attending the Church of Christ at Littleville, my church. Incidentally, one will seldom see the place name written first—“Littleville Church of Christ,” for example—even though Churches of Christ have local autonomy, because of a literal interpretation of scripture (see Romans 16:16). Apparently identifying oneself as “Littleville Church of Christ” denotes denominational standing, as with the different Baptist organizations (Primitive, Southern, Free Will, etc.). In fact, church signs frequently only read, “Church of Christ Meets Here.” I have often been curious as to how this has become universal sign verbage for us Church of Christers as one of our main tenets is autonomy from regional, district, or national jurisdiction, such as the Southern Baptist Convention. Granted, this is quite a lengthy digression, but such contextualizations are crucial to understanding fundamentalisms.

So, when the Smith family began worshiping at Littleville, they soon volunteered to donate their time and money to refurbishing the old building and furnishings. They installed a drop ceiling, painted the auditorium a nice cheery eggshell, obtained donations of used cushioned pews, and attended to scores of other details that gave the building a friendlier, more inviting look. The Smiths, their kids and grandkids still worship at Littleville, still volunteer; they are in charge of fruit baskets at Christmastime and Vacation Bible School in the summer. They have performed an invaluable service to the congregation, but I sometimes look around at the more modern surroundings and remember the way the old building looked many, many years ago. It was a stringent building for a stringent religion, and for good or ill, shaped my being deeply and irrevocably.

The walls were a dark orange-red with large knotholes, made of the same paneling one might see in a rustic cabin or hunting lodge. From the old, high ceilings hung slowly rotating fans that, as I recall, never provided the slightest bit of relief to the heat of a summer gospel meeting. (Church of Christ meetings are never called revivals; those are what the Baptists have.) Apart from the heat, what I remember most was the hard pews. For thirty years the Church had the same old, dark, hard pews that creaked with any movement. The windows were stained glass, but not depicting characters or events from the Bible. They were a deep yellow-gold opaque that seemed to darken, rather than illuminate, the room.

The most wonderful part of the old building was the basement. Unlike the rest of the building, it almost never got redecorated, so the basement remained dark and mysterious. It also smelled dank and musty, like a cave. And as with any cave adventure, voices rang with muted echoes the farther one descended into its belly. The church basement had four rooms—three classrooms with old, cheap blackboards that repelled chalk and one mechanical room where the monstrous heater groaned in total darkness. The “backroom,” as it was called, was a treasure trove for generations of children, for in this room were stored cast off items and furnishings for almost a century. Basement classes were for the big kids, ones big enough to wind down the stairs without falling down and breaking a leg. There were no flannel boards with shepherds on them down there, we learned about the wrath of God and the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb.

How might recollections of an old church house be salient to Misfit identifications, to rural Southern formations of queerness? First, there is significance, I believe, in the claiming of these spaces, for claiming sites of fundamentalist growth runs counter to generally acceptable queer identifications (“You can’t be queer and fundamentalist”...). Queer lives are essentially erased by those who would dismiss the possibility of retaining a faith and spirituality with roots in fundamentalist (or evangelical or charismatic or Pentecostal) Christianity. I suggest that parallels can also be drawn here to rural queerness in that there seems to be an assumed unitary metropolitan queer subjectivity that rejects non-metro queer lived experiences as irrelevant to identity construction. Thus, the queered Misfit also disrupts the metronormativity of queerness.

There is also a particularity of place to be found in the old church building, itself “misfitting” and marginalized in mainstream culture and religion. ² Remember how the Smiths’ renovations made the building more inviting? To me, the building had been inviting in all its darkness. Some form of darkness lurks below the surface in fundamentalist Christianity, whether it is the threat of eternal darkness for the unrepentant soul or the dark blot of sin that will condemn one to that state. The indoctrination of darkness of a child—for approximately one-seventh of her life for thirty five years—is a powerful experience. The darkness that is such a fundamental aspect of fundamentalist Christianity—the insistence on man’s sinful nature and the collective reprobate nature of mankind—is what, I suppose, we “enlightened” queers are expected to renounce as offensive. I suggest, rather, that it is precisely what we cling to.

If, in addition to its literal connotations, darkness is a metaphor for Misfit identifications and therefore a contextualized construction of identity, then it is coexistent and mutually informed by metaphors of light—Christ, love, heaven, for example. In light there is hope, and there is a great capacity for hope in fundamentalist thinking, not an

unfounded, unsubstantiated pie-in-the-sky hope through which we might suggest individual or societal transcendence. It is a Hebrew scripture warrior hope—one which O'Connor understood and one with which darkness is entangled. It is the hope of the Misfit.

The Misfit can access both darkness and light because both are so deeply embedded. The Misfit does not serve Southern nostalgic through uncomplicated narratives of place and past; rather, she speaks her language—rural, fundamentalist Christian, Southern—in a spirit of reconstruction and reparation. The language of reconstruction does not shy away from either darkness or light, and the Misfit recognizes that sometimes, it is not an “either/or” configuration. The complexities and constrictions of Southern place—particularly fundamentalist places—warrants complicated conversations that, in O'Connor's words are “shocking,” and the Misfit realizes—as did O'Connor—that it must be in terms understandable to the inhabitants of those spaces. Sometimes the unsettling observations are to be found in settings as innocuous as a moldy old church house.

“Demanding the Redemptive Act”: The Grotesque and Southern Identity

O'Connor points out the intransigence of fundamentalist discourse through characters captured in their moments of grace. We are caught, as Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater in cycles of “stringent religious practice and guilt” (Martin, 1968, p. 121). In clinging to constricting fundamentalism by clinging to the Cross, we engage in continuous attempts to exorcise the same Christ who haunted Motes: a wild, the ragged figure that haunts him, whose gift of redemption is as scary as the devil himself. From the disruptions of the Misfit and the distortions of the grotesque, the South might gain sight; we might recognize that intransigent forms of Southernness submerged in white patriarchal notions of Southern identity are themselves distorted in their narrowness. In “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (MM, p. 36) O'Connor connects the grotesque with the freak.

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man [sic], and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological.” (p. 44)

She suggests that, rather than consider humanity material, or social, the South considers man in light of God and God's relation to him. Southerners are not essentially hyper-intuitive concerning the nature of man, but perceive that God is necessary to wholeness. Southern, fundamentalist Protestant, the Misfit is grotesque in his or her radical convictions and shocks the reader toward the realm of mystery. The Misfit, like O'Connor's writing itself, has a decidedly Southern accent, which Southerners can recognize because it is familiar.

I was raised to believe that the devil is alive and at work in the world, every bit as much as Jesus. My daddy and grandmother took every opportunity to point out evil and sin and blame it on Satan. Whether a threat of terrorist acts or the possibility of a meteor colliding with earth or misfortune falling on someone in the family, “That's the Ol' Devil,” Daddy would declare. The South has fashioned a world in

which there is an ongoing Armageddon, and that only contributes to its grotesque.

“In the cathedral of Flannery O’connor,” writes Di Renzo, “the gargoyles have the last laugh” (1993, p. 225). He goes on to delineate these gargoyles, exemplars of the grotesque in her fiction, as “the seemingly deranged Fundamentalists who...assert their faith in a post-Christian South—no matter how ludicrous and obscene it makes them appear...” (p. 4). Perhaps the grotesquerie of a Christ-haunted South lies in the white Southerner’s fear that, “he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God” (MM, p. 45). The Misfit, then, is a distorted figure created to draw our attention, by his obscene assertion of faith, to our “essential displacement” (p. 45) from God’s image. In other words, we did not ask for Jesus to redeem us, and God has not done us any favors by creating us in His likeness. In fact it was more of a curse: we are cursed with the awesome realization that we are connected to a God who loves us, and we resent the choice to choose Him. We rage against doing so.

The Price of Restoration

Where there is no vision, the people perish but he that keepeth the law, happy is he (Proverbs 29:18). Contemporary America has more in common with the ancient Hebrew people than we might first imagine. A most obvious comparison, and one relevant to my thesis, is our need for a vision; we seek a plan. And lacking one, the Proverb tells us, we turn to the security of “the law,” in our case, accountability measures to prove to us that we leave none of our schoolchildren “behind,” that we as teachers are “highly qualified,” that our schools are making “Adequate Yearly Progress.” In this we may be happy, blessed. Yet here the comparison departs, as the educational law we look to for assurances is mundane, antithetical to the idea of a vision. And it is here that I have borrowed a prophet—O’Connor’s Misfit, through whom we may confront our own narrowness of thought. Contextualized by Southern place and conceptualized from a queerly fundamental perspective, I consider the price of restoration exacted by lawkeeping—the collecting and disaggregation of data, for example—which cannot, will not save us.

As Southerners, we continue to demand the redemptive act, in our interactions with others within a code of manners, in our practicing of what we believe is a God-pleasing fundamentalism, in our violent raging for restoration. O’Connor speaks to this expectation in the novel reader, “He [sic] wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to mock damnation or a mock innocence (MM, 1969, p. 48). The temptation remains for readers to be dismissive of the traditional underpinnings of place fronted by O’Connor’s narrator, believing, for example, that one cannot be queer and fundamentalist, nostalgic and progressive. It would seem that the stance of the researcher would be clear: denounce the appearance of narrowness and backwardness in the name of transformative thought. Yet, these are the positionings of the Misfit, who inhabits incompatible positions, occupying and thinking from those positions, and they are the real-world positionings of too many to be so easily dismissed without consideration of complexity. Pinar writes, “Being on the margins is dangerous but at least you can breathe” (2001, p. 479), and suggests that those who identify ourselves as exiles and Misfits claim the authority of those margins. The self-claiming of exile subjectivity might grant one passage “between and beyond dominant binaries such as insider/outsider, southerner/northerner, victim/survivor” (Pinar, p. 479) or

queer/fundamentalist. In any event, to declare that one must lay claim to one identification or the other is simplistic.

My Misfit experience is the kind of “difficult knowledge” (1998, p. 19) that Britzman and others ask us to grapple with. It is difficult work—difficult ideas, difficult subject positions, and difficult theoretical frameworks. Uncovering anomalous forms of Southernness is ethically and politically difficult to work through, yet it is a position of our time in a post-911 world. As Misfit I do not choose an aggressive critique of the South, fundamentalism, or Southern comfort-structures any more than I refuse my queer identity; I occupy both spaces. To grasp firmly to either discourse at the exclusion of the other would begin a “hardening process” (Doll, 2000, p. xix) that runs counter to poststructural thought. Without the nuances of inbetweenness, a critique of Southernness would be little more than heroic narrative. Instead, *currere* enables me to understand the experience of being a misfit.

My grotesquerie is neither ready-made nor complete. Grotesque images, according to Bakhtin (1968), “remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics” (p. 25). I recognize that as a Misfit grotesque of Southern place, I am transgressive, in the words of Di Renzo (1993), “cross[ing] borders, ignor[ing] boundaries, and overspill[ing] margins...play[ing] havoc with our most cherished ideas, celebrating the material world without romanticizing it” (p. 5, 7). As a Misfit, I identify as a Southerner and feel a deep attachment to Southern place, yet constricting notions of Southernness—such as fundamentalism and the manners that guide our relations—negate aspects of my experience, identity, desire, and world view. Attending to anomalous forms of Southernness—such as a shattering grace and queer Southernness—creates curricular conversation about the possibility of progressive transformation of Southern place through the construction of Southern identity.

Notes

1 Abbreviations of O’Connor Texts:

CS *The Complete Short Stories*
CFO *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*
CW *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works*
HB *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor*
MM *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*
Three Three *by Flannery O’Connor*
WB *Wise Blood*

2 Actually, the Church of Christ is often seen as anomalous by other fundamentalist denominations, as it practices only a capalla singing, for example. This church prefers to be set apart, however, and will not even allow itself to be referred to as a denomination. Despite the fancy footwork and scripture quoting when asked, it really does believe it is the one true, first-century church. So then, fundamentalist is ultimately a misnomer; the Church of Christ is a restoration church.

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