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Charles Andrews

Whitworth University, charlesandrews@whitworth.edu

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CHARLES ANDREWS

Colored Man: The Ambiguous White Male Body in "Parker's Back"

The importance of O'Connor's Christianity for both her life and her art has commanded much critical attention. However, "Parker's Back," her story of a tattooed man who gets inked with the image of a Byzantine Christ, can be limited by a narrow focus on the theological implications of the narrative. Using the multiple foci of critical whiteness and masculinity studies, we might uncover the ambiguous racial and gender dynamics of O'Connor's story. With this interpretive lens, the particular racialized and gendered body of the titular character encourages a reconsideration of the story's theology. As a story of incarnation and its devastating effects, "Parker's Back" demands that we attend to the particularities of embodiment. Not some unspecific or universal phenomenon, incarnation occurs in a distinct historical moment, and Obadiah Elihue Parker's white male body loses its definition the longer he remains enthralled by a force (or forces) that go beyond his desire and initiate his begrudgingly accepted role as a prophet in an Old Testament mode.

Parker's prophetic witness might appear to lack the specific message and clarity of purpose found in the biblical book of his namesake. No gloomy predictions of decimation or litany of sins give coherence to Parker's actions as they do in Obadiah's vision of Yahweh's tirade against Edom. No clearly defined vision of any kind assists Parker in his transition from drifter to downtrodden messenger. The message he brings is instead a wordless invocation of God made flesh, and his primary audience, like the recalcitrant Edomites, is a wife who stubbornly insists upon a god of pure spirit. By producing this confrontation between theological emphases on spiritual and incarnate deity, O'Connor invites consideration of specific carnal realities like the racialized and gendered body. What her critique of white male power offers is a less narrowly defined concept of white masculinity as she produces a new identity for Parker where stasis and loss of power undermine his assertiveness and agency. O'Connor investigates how God's claim on Parker's body blurs gender and racial boundaries to enmesh these identity politics with theology.

Strictly theological interpretations of "Parker's Back" are not so much inaccurate as underdeveloped, at least when they neglect the physical in favor of the philosophical, spiritual, and symbolic meanings. Oddly enough, to regard O'Connor's work exclusively in theological terms threatens to replicate the heresy of Sarah Ruth Cates, Parker's wife whose gnosticism includes suspicion of the human body, the institutional Church, and iconography.¹ Noting this critical tendency, Christina Bieber Lake argues that "O'Connor used the grotesque to make bodies visible. But readers continue to ignore the bodies in her fiction by emphasizing what we think they symbolize" (91). Lake insists upon seeing incarnation developed in O'Connor's fiction through the grotesque, and she critiques symbolic readings that push away from the physical. Yet we might expand upon her investigation by showing how O'Connor renders the racialized and gendered body as integral to incarnational Christianity. With the development of O. E. Parker, the story provides both an engagement with contemporary constructions of white masculinity and a re-evaluation of O'Connor's theological explorations in light of race and gender.

Admittedly, Parker's race and gender might not at first glance seem as important to the narrative as more overtly developed themes of Christianity and religious practice. For an engagement with racial tension in the 1950s and 1960s, we might be more obviously led to the title story in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the collection in which "Parker's

Back" was published. In this story, a young man named Julian struggles to enlighten his hopelessly racist mother who cannot recognize the condescension in her genteel southern pleasantries. In the New South, Julian tells his mother, "The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn" (CW 499). The backdrop for the conflict between mother and son is the racial integration of public transportation, and the underlying tension between the two is Julian's disdain for his mother but inability to fully assert himself as an independent man. "Parker's Back" also depicts a man incapable of separating from a woman he detests, but the point of conflict between Parker and Sarah Ruth is essentially theological and ethical: she wants to save his soul and he wants to have her body. Race is rarely overtly mentioned in the story, but the persistent attention to Parker's skin demands an analysis of his whiteness and coloration, especially since these bodily elements produce tension in gender relations.

As I employ it here, the term "coloration" refers to the gradual process of transfiguration Parker undergoes both through the physical manipulation by ink—which is somehow chosen yet also compulsory—and to the concomitant alteration in his social status. Rather than simply inhabiting an identity matrix (white, middle-class, straight, male) so obviously dominant that it no longer seems constructed like minority identities, Parker sheds the seeming invisibility of the majority. The coloring in his skin is only the superficial part of his transformation, and, indeed, transfiguration is a more accurate term because it captures the spiritual element of his bodily change.

The very fact that we may overlook race and gender as determining factors in "Parker's Back" reinforces the problem articulated by Michael Kimmel in *Manhood in America*. Kimmel argues that white men seem so natural, so synonymous with the cultural gestalt, that they become invisible. White masculinity is the racial and gendered subjectivity that because of power and privilege does not need to recognize itself as possessing either race or gender. Drawing on Simone De Beauvoir's argument that female is always the particular while male is the universal, Kimmel remarks with dismay that he is the "generic person" (3). The task of critical white studies and masculinity studies is to make these identity markers the subjects of analysis rather than the seemingly natural and/or universal field from which all other identities deviate. "Parker's Back" is an exemplary text for this project because its racial and gender dynamics have long gone under-discussed due to the invisibility of white masculinity. What is made visible by his coloration is social difference, the sort of difference that white males of privilege are typically able to deflect. Acquiring tattoos is a way to identify with a different social class, most directly felt by Parker when he finds his tattoos attracting the women he desires.

As Kimmel was publishing the first edition of *Manhood in America* (amid a chorus of theorists and cultural critics interested in masculinity and race), new directions in Flannery O'Connor studies began emerging with greater consideration of gender as a crucial part of her aesthetic.² Marshall Bruce Gentry, for instance, claims that O'Connor complicates gender norms: "... characters frequently find redemption as they move toward androgyny" (57). Richard Giannone adds theology to his analysis of O'Connor's gender disruption when he argues that "Wherever divine intervention corrects human perception, there lies grace. Freely and universally given, supreme truth disarranges the roles assigned by gender and age so as to overturn the power wielded by these differences" (75). Studies like these offer a starting point for seeing gender dynamics as fluctuating and flexible in O'Connor's stories, but the additional element of race further complicates her reconfiguration of gender norms. As an analysis of "Parker's Back" indicates, the inability of the white male to maintain

his sources of power and privilege derives from a compulsion toward seemingly opposing practices: namely, marriage and tattooing. Parker's body continually undergoes a process of coloration that makes his skin less obviously white, and this coloring is both a pleasure and some refuge from the anomie of married life that threatens his masculine autonomy. This masculine autonomy functions in O'Connor's story as the particular state of being Parker desires most, despite compulsive attraction to less autonomous positions (i.e., his marriage to Sarah Ruth). Autonomy signifies the fullest exercise of one's power, a willful state of being that is possible when race and gender go unquestioned. For a white male like Parker, the drifter's life becomes possible because he flees his mother for the navy where "His features hardened into the features of a man" (CW 658). O'Connor does not emphasize the discipline of military life or its communal formation. Rather, hardening into a man has more to do with the literal drifting at sea and the myriad stops at ports with "run-down places" he compares to Birmingham, Alabama (659). His identity allows him to choose a drifter's life rather than being forced into it, and this choice signifies the power inherent in white masculinity.

Outside of her fiction, O'Connor was largely ambivalent about the subjects of gender and race.³ She claimed to divide the world into a different binary relationship: "the Irsksome and the non-Irsksome without regard to sex" (22 Sept. 1956, HB 176). This caginess, perhaps more a product of wit and rhetoric than authentic theoretical expression, contrasts with her aesthetic practice. Her stories demonstrate frequent negotiation of gender identities that vie with contemporary conceptions. Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that marriage in the 1950s was shaped by the "breadwinner ethic" which demanded that the man, against his desires and often against his means, be the sole economic provider in a household (11). "Parker's Back" depicts an arrangement something like this, but Parker's conflicting desires situate him in continual revolt from his role as breadwinner.

In a letter to Elizabeth Hester ("A"), O'Connor described her source material for tattooing, which shows her reconstruction of gender roles through her fiction. This letter is often cited as a key to understanding "Parker's Back" because of her description of the story as "dramatizing a heresy" (14 July 1964, HB 593).⁴ But the discussion of her source provides another insight into her craft that more directly shows her manipulation of gender:

I found out about tattooing from a book I found in the Marboro list called *Memoirs of a Tattooist*. The old man that wrote it took tattooing as a high art and a great profession. No nonsense. Picture of his wife in it—very demure Victorian lady in off-shoulder gown. Everything you can see except her face and hands is tattooed. Looks like fabric. HE DID IT. (HB 593-94)

Here the gender dynamic is reversed. Rather than a man acquiring tattoos as part of his developing identity and against the wishes of his mother and his wife, *Memoirs of a Tattooist* indicates that the woman was subjected to male-determined discoloration. The tattoos look like fabric designed to keep his demure wife permanently covered as if wearing a Western burqa. She is his showpiece and his canvas, and the ominous text in all capitals—HE DID IT—suggests a sinister dominance of the tattooist over his wife. It would be unnecessarily reductive to read "Parker's Back" merely as O'Connor's assault on the old tattooist's memoir, but her reversal of its gender roles indicates her sensitivity to the wife's condition. Being colored is a large part of what makes the tattooist's wife his possession—a canvas for his art. Parker's initial agency would appear to be greater, but the further he goes in his attempts to be a fully tattooed man, the less agency he seems to have. The mystique of coloration draws

him into a position more like the tattooist's wife, colored and on display, and he experiences this condition as a mania and as a diminishing of his masculinity.

The old tattooist whose memoir educated O'Connor seems to have subjugated his wife's entire body, a feat desired by stereotypically dominant males yet impossible for Parker. Kimmel notes that the failure of men to establish masculine dominance in public arenas led many "to colonize the home, to find a small corner that could be unmistakably 'his,' like the den or the study" (105). Upon returning home at the story's end, Parker comically attempts to assert his dominance, to colonize the space rather than apologize for coming home late and empty-handed. He slams his car door, stamps on the steps, and bangs on the front door, making "as much noise as possible to assert that he was still in charge here, that his leaving her for a night without word meant nothing except it was the way he did things" (CW 672). This overcompensation indicates his underlying recognition that he is not in control of himself and certainly not the master of his house. Parker cannot carve out even the small niche of a den or study—nor, we might add, the front porch. His sphere of dominance is restricted to the surface of his body, a space that seems to control him almost as much as he controls it, driving him irresistibly toward more images and designs.

What prevents this failure from being simply the hackneyed concept of the "crisis of masculinity" is that Parker's failures seem crafted by a force beyond himself that works against his own desires. After being flung from the pool-hall bar, Parker considers the uncanny compulsions that have determined his existence: "Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth" (CW 672). He goes through the list of times he was compelled to do things beyond his basic inclinations and the various feelings associated with them. O'Connor suggests not only that Parker's identity is slipping but that his bodily affect is not the sole determinant of his existence. Through this construction of his motivations, we are reminded that the spiritual force cannot be separated from the physical world.

The feelings connected with his obedience to instinct are mostly unpleasant, and the actions all pertain to his negotiation of masculinity and color. Parker's first calling is pleasurable because it gives him purpose and seems to chart for him a destiny. Rather than being plain and "ordinary as a loaf of bread," the goal of becoming a visual wonder like the tattooed man propels his travels and creates for him a persona made of beer-drinking, bar fights, and carousing with "the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (CW 658). The slowly changing tone of his skin creates a lifestyle that appalls and shames his mother, who abruptly puts it to an end by dragging him to a revival at a "big lighted church" (658). Though Parker likes the kind of girls who like tattooed men, he is compelled to be with a woman like Sarah Ruth, who seeks to save Parker from himself much as his mother did. After marrying Sarah Ruth, however, he sinks into a "huge dissatisfaction" that can only be cured with another tattoo (659). The free space on his body decreases, and "his dissatisfaction grew and became general" (659). Thomas F. Haddox argues that acquiring tattoos suggests an "embrace of the visual [that] translates into specifically masculine power" (412). Haddox locates Parker's general dissatisfaction over his tattooed self in his sense of slavery to the visual. As a tattooed man, Parker's body is contained by the scrutiny of those like Sarah Ruth and his "hefty blonde" employer who sarcastically remarks that his body is a "walking panner-rammer" (CW 664). What Parker loses in the coloring of his skin is the white privilege of invisibility, and though this change initially ushers in a host of stereotypically masculine

behaviors, he is ultimately enslaved by these compulsions and unable to maintain a life of militarism, womanizing, and carousing.

The loss of agency might be, in fact, good for Parker. Contrary to the liberal impulse toward empowering the disempowered, O'Connor offers a reduction of the powerful. Ultimately, this may give some sort of balance, but that balance is complicated by the fact that Parker does not start off in any clear position of privilege—other than that produced by his gender, race, and lack of encumbrances. We do not have in this story anything so simplistic as a reversal of fortune. Rather, Parker's gradual loss of agency is part of his increasing reliance upon Sarah Ruth and, more importantly, the unseen, god-like force that compels his actions. What this loss of agency means is that the few remaining valuables in Parker's life—his autonomy, masculinity, and whiteness—are stripped away so that he must necessarily live in relationship with another person and cannot gratify his wanderlust. The "militarism, womanizing, and carousing" that define his life before Sarah Ruth are part of that momentum fostered by the privilege of his autonomy. While loss of agency might appear negative, for O'Connor there seems to be a benefit to the rootedness that results from this loss. Parker's life is determined by a rejection of the stable, secure, and static. His primary evidence of power comes from the ability to keep moving and to decorate his body. But the free space on his skin diminishes after his marriage, signifying two forms of restriction upon his power.

Restricted power is most notable when manifest in Parker's failures to follow his desire. At the beginning of the narrative, Parker feels "conjured," unsure why he has not left Sarah Ruth in her pregnancy (*CW* 655). Parker's shame at himself has less to do with guilt or the dulling of sexual appetite but with his inability to leave. In Parker's properly ordered world, male desire governs all relations and situations. When desire is spent upon one object, then a true man moves along to other desires. Parker's hesitation early in the narrative is also the reader's hesitation, the prompting of a question—why does Parker stay?—that is never explicitly answered. His inexplicable reasons for staying propel the narrative and suggest a force beyond human desire as a factor in human action. This is O'Connor's suggestion of the presence of God, and as in many of her other stories, God compels action that deviates from human wishes and impulses and drives humans into drastic and often hazardous situations.

The compulsions that drive Parker beginning with his wonderstruck encounter in the tent of the tattooed man become increasingly uncanny, almost psychotic, as if dissociation from one's desire is necessary for disrupting white male power. Throughout the story, extrasensory perceptions shape Parker's actions. When Parker and Sarah Ruth first meet, he makes a show of injuring his hand while working on his truck. She inspects his hand, and Parker feels "jolted back to life by her touch" (*CW* 656). Spirituality appears in these spaces between physical objects, and the primary tension is between Sarah Ruth's desire to live in those liminal spaces while Parker seeks closer contact with the objects themselves. We never have a clear sense about why she assents to marrying Parker, except for the implications that she will be rid of her numerous siblings and may find a way to save Parker from his sins. So the jolt that Parker feels might not be shared by Sarah Ruth, whose revulsion at all things physical is an integral part of O'Connor's dramatization of heresy. This jolt is a non-material perception with a material source—the contact of human hands. From this initial jolt, Parker develops an attraction that feels at times like an illness, like he "might be coming down with something" (661), or like insanity. The longer he stays in this relationship with Sarah Ruth, the less he seems to control his own fate. Despite his claim that "A man can't save his self from whatever it is he don't deserve none of my sympathy," Parker seems utterly incapable of saving himself from any aspect of his situation (669). Living with Sarah Ruth produces a kind of psychosis

that manifests physically in "a little tic in the side of his face" (664). He finds himself "turning around abruptly as if someone were trailing him" and he recalls that his granddaddy had "ended in the state mental hospital" (664). The powerful urges that lead him toward Sarah Ruth, keep him there against his will, and culminate in the irresistible commissioning of the Byzantine Christ tattoo suggest an unseen presence that may be the ravages of insanity or the handiwork of God. Regardless, these urges are non-material yet act in the material world upon Parker's body. Incarnation is the oneness of spirit and flesh, which in Parker's case involves a frightening, aggravating spirit and a slowly transforming flesh.

Parker's failure to dominate his home, assert himself as breadwinner, and achieve clear autonomy suggests a loss of white male power and privilege. The echoes of Old Testament narrative in his struggle accentuate the sense that he not only fails individually but that he also fails to enter fully into community. While plowing the old woman's field, Parker crashes her tractor into a lone tree that propels him into the air with a shout: "GOD ABOVE!" (CW 665). His exclamation is both blasphemy and supplication, as he is thrown from his shoes which are consumed, along with the tree, by flame. By comparison with its biblical parallel, the story of Moses called by Yahweh from out of a burning bush, Parker's encounter is significantly more violent. Moses was commanded to remove his sandals while standing on holy ground; Parker has no choice. Parker's crash is one more instance of a spiritual force acting upon physical matter against his best intentions. In the biblical account, Moses is called to lead Yahweh's people, to give direction to the Israelites and act according to Yahweh's direction. O'Connor's version gives no direction so clear and leaves Parker terrified and superstitious: ". . . if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it" (665). The decline of his privileged white male status reverberates in the absence of a call to peoplehood. No chosen people await his leadership after the violent encounter with the flaming tree. He experiences the shocking rift in the fabric of his ordinary life, but he does not have the reward of some new privileged position. From the time of the tractor wreck onward, his life is in a downward spiral governed by some unseen presence yet leading him further into isolation and powerlessness.

At other points in the story, Parker's body is similarly thrown about in allusion to biblical narrative. The coloration of his body, which makes him less white, and the failure to assert a domineering masculinity position Parker as an outsider to the identity categories in which he would seem to belong. This shift in his identity, along with his various castings-out, render Parker as a prophet in the Old Testament style—perpetually eccentric and reluctantly commissioned. One of his first "dates" with Sarah Ruth includes a rejection that denies his masculine presence, gives physical weight to their emotion, and alludes to Hebrew prophecy. Parker wants sex and Sarah Ruth wants salvation. His flirting goes too far, and her tiny frame offers a powerful resistance: ". . . she thrust him away with such force that the door of the truck came off and he found himself flat on his back on the ground" (CW 663). From this position Parker decides he is through with her, and just as abruptly they are "married in the County Ordinary's office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous" (663). The closer Parker gets to fulfilling the compulsions of his spirit—against the desires of his heart—the less he is able to control himself and his surroundings. He is drawn to Sarah Ruth and cannot have her sexually at his whim, presumably unlike the other girls in his life who are attracted to him for his tattoos. Parker is like Hosea, only instead of marrying a prostitute to make a public example for the community, he marries a Bible-thumping fundamentalist whose Straight Gospel views arouse suspicion of anything physical. His despair is mostly a private burden rather than public witness, but his personal transformation functions as part of O'Connor's critique of white male power.

The ambiguous identity O'Connor creates emerges through the constant reminders of the spiritual investment in physical matter. Parker staves off his general dissatisfaction with life by getting more tattoos, but the free space on his skin is rapidly filled and all that remains blank is his back. The narrative drives toward the filling of his back, suggested in the story's title, and the impending climax of the story formally expresses the content of compulsion. Though this unseen force suggests a powerful spirituality at work in the story, every movement of this spirit works in and through the physical. Even Sarah Ruth's gnostic theology suggests the carnal, as if it cannot be avoided. The only other man in Sarah Ruth's life is her father, a "Straight Gospel preacher" who is "away, spreading it in Florida" (*CW* 662). O'Connor is humorously ambiguous about the antecedent of the pronoun "it," and the numerous siblings that surround Sarah Ruth suggest that Reverend Cates may have more on his mind than the Straight Gospel.

Sarah Ruth, or at least her worldview, bears the brunt of O'Connor's criticism in the story. It is she who is "against color" such that she will not wear make-up and disapproves of Parker's tattoo fixation (*CW* 655). This color prejudice is explicitly linked with lifestyle choices she deems sinful—a worldview forged in her fundamentalist Christian upbringing. Sinfulness extends to what is different, which in this case means something like non-white. O'Connor's comments upon the story in her letters indicate that Sarah Ruth's heretical theology is her primary target, but the theological discourse about the invisibility of God that Sarah Ruth uses against Parker is homologous with the underlying racial and gender discourses. If, as Sarah Ruth protests, God cannot be pictured and must be a spirit whose face "no man shall see" (674), then God's presence is eerily similar to the presence of the white male whose "natural" dominance renders him the primal term from which all other identities deviate. Parker's Byzantine Christ completes his coloration, thereby deepening the ambiguity of his whiteness, which pushes him further from Sarah Ruth's conception of God. If O'Connor's aim in this story is largely theological—the thrashing of a heresy—then an analysis of race and gender uncovers a latent project to make visible the overlooked construction of white masculinity.

The primary marital conflict between Parker and Sarah Ruth has to do with proper use of the body, a debate that foregrounds their theological differences while establishing the stakes of Parker's racial and gender identities. Sarah Ruth is "forever sniffing up sin" (*CW* 655)—in modern technologies like the automobile, and in social markers like tobacco and alcohol consumption, profane language, and face paint. The narrator, assuming Parker's viewpoint, asserts that ". . . God knew some paint would have improved [Sarah Ruth's face]" (655). Sarah's excessive whiteness is a source of diminished sexual attraction for Parker. She positions herself "against color" which perplexes Parker about her willingness to marry him (655). Bringing color to Sarah Ruth's face suggests that her strait-laced austerity could be loosened by dabbling in a few activities worth blushing about. Parker senses that her acquiescence in marriage may be a ruse, and that she actually likes all of the sinful things she perceives in him but cannot admit this and must use him as a cover for her desires. But the need for color has another resonance pertinent to O'Connor's exploration of whiteness. The stigma against make-up comes from an association of face painting and loose sexual morals. Sarah Ruth wants no part of her to evince sexuality, and her deliberate unattractiveness is part of her overall gnosticism, her rejection of physical pleasure in favor of pure spirituality. Being colorful would make her less white, both in the literal sense of covering whiteness through paint and the figurative sense of associating her with the more embodied non-white other. Sarah Ruth's dismissal of Parker's tattoos is blunt: "Don't

tell me, . . . I don't like it. I ain't got any use for it" (657). Color has no use-value in her conception of the world. When Parker gives his sexy retort—"You ought to see the ones you can't see"—he sends a full blush into Sarah Ruth's cheeks, as though his colorful body for a brief moment extends to hers (657).

The practice of tattooing bodies is explicitly linked with the non-white in Sarah Ruth's chastisement. She tells him that his tattoos are "no better than what a fool Indian would do" (CW 660). Parker is openly identified as non-white because of the ink in his skin. But tattooing also appears vain—"Vanity of vanities," according to Sarah Ruth. It is sinful both to be uncivilized (like the Indian) and to be over-civilized and self-satisfied. Her further misinterpretation of his skin reduces the virility of his appearance. Of all his designs, she thinks that ". . . the chicken is not as bad as the rest" (660). She does not admit to liking any of them, but she hates this image the least. Parker's masculinity is threatened by her seeing his eagle as a chicken, reducing the fearsome, masculine image to something only a "fool would waste their time having . . . put on themself" (660). Sarah Ruth refuses to see Parker accurately, preventing his masculine presence and undermining his whiteness. By doing so, she is an agent of the ambiguity in Parker's identity.

The Byzantine Christ that entralls Parker and solidifies his role as Obadiah the prophet also completes his (dis)coloration. Parker's yearning to be "colored" is a spiritual (and physical) calling that separates him even from the lower-class Cates family and their "Straight Gospel" Christianity. The "hefty blonde" woman he plows for informs him that ". . . she knew where she could find a fourteen-year-old colored boy who could" (CW 665) do his job better, placing him in an ambiguous space between white and black—and incapable of asserting patriarchal dominance either at home or work. The further Parker goes in pursuing his prophetic calling, the less power he has, and this pursuit re-structures gender relations (which become inscrutable even to himself). Ultimately, the icon on Parker's back suggests the disruption of racial and gender dynamics despite the specificity of its incarnation.

Parker experiences his calling through physical transformation that includes the addition of the icon and the loss of weight—transformations that make him less white and diminish his masculine presence. When he enters the tattoo artist's shop, Parker appears drunk. The artist refuses to work on him, until with some effort he recognizes Parker: "You've fallen off some . . . You must have been in jail" (CW 666). "Married," Parker replies. The artist who tattoos Parker's Christ is the same age as Parker but looks older, with a thin body and balding head, and he looks at Parker with an air of superiority. The artist is no robust specimen of dominant masculinity, yet his "intellectual, superior stare" separates him from Parker (666). Parker's "falling off" comes from his marriage; on the literal level, his wife's bad cooking has led to weight loss. And yet, the wasting condition is part of his bodily loss that occurs because of his wife's disembodied theology. He is losing his masculinity as well as his physicality, his carnal self that needs nourishment. Getting the tattoo is a misguided gesture of affection for Sarah Ruth, but it functions as a reassertion of his own embodied self. To be fully embodied is for Parker to be more fully colored (just as he is dissatisfied with the blotchy appearance of his skin by comparison with the uniform covering of the tattooed man from his youth). Moving away from whiteness is moving away from disembodied spirituality.

The climactic unveiling of his tattooed back to Sarah Ruth ignites in her a Zwinglian display of iconoclasm. Parker hopes for some connection with his wife, or at least some way to silence her and regain power in his marriage. He achieves neither goal. She first remarks that the image of Christ "ain't anybody I know" (CW 674). Then she thrashes Parker across the shoulders with a broom. He has become the prophet at the end of the

story but remains utterly misunderstood at home. The welts on the Christ emphasize the incarnation in direct historical specificity. Like a flagellant mortifying the flesh, Sarah Ruth thrashes with her broom—except that the flesh is not her own. Her need to mortify extends beyond her own body to Parker's, and the attack upon his "idolatrous" ways is also an attack upon his masculinity. His entire body, with the exceptions of head and hands, is colored in ink, and the achievement of becoming a totally colored man leads to total loss of dominance in his marriage.

The ending of the story has been seen as a kind of redemption that occurs through a loss of masculinity. As Gentry argues, "If one decides that O'Connor associates childhood with androgyny, one can also develop a reading of the late story 'Parker's Back' in which O. E. Parker is feminized as he is redeemed, for when Sarah Ruth Cates beats him with a broom at the end of the story, he cries 'like a baby'" (69). But if O'Connor is dramatizing Sarah Ruth's heresy, then she remains an unredeemed heretic who at best functions as the agent of Parker's transforming identity. Parker may settle into his position outside dominant white masculinity, but he does so at the price of infantilization, and the narrative retains its judgmental representation of Sarah Ruth.

Parker's redemption might be more accurately seen in the acceptance of his name, role as prophet, and demonstration of the unity of spirit and flesh. On the porch outside his house, Parker whispers his name, Obadiah, through the keyhole and ". . . all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (CW 673). Accepting his name, however tentatively, awakens a spiritual transformation that directly blends with his body. The edenic images of flora and fauna that cover his body appear even more brilliantly in his soul, which is perfectly arabesque rather than "haphazard and botched" (659) like his body. Just as the rudimentary elements of the Eucharist are invested with divine presence, Parker's limited body erupts into perfection. To be colored is to be more Godly, and the tattoos that Sarah Ruth finds so foolish and uncivilized become the means for accessing the spirituality that she hopes to find through some unmediated pathway. As Parker humbles himself on the porch and owns his prophetic name, he relinquishes the power inherited through his gender and achieves unity between the colored soul and flesh. By accepting his liminal position where race and gender are ambiguous, Parker finds a new way of being. O'Connor gives us nothing definite at the story's end—there is little comfort or reconciliation or peace. But somehow through the acceptance of this new identity, Parker has escaped ennui and entered a changed world of body and spirit. ♀

Notes

- 1 Timothy P. Caron argues that "*Wise Blood* demonstrates one common white Southern response to politics' 'intrusion' into religion by emphasizing the need for individual redemption, stressing the continued viability of Christian salvation over 'political' questions such as race" (5-6). While I recognize that the mythical and cosmological concerns of a Christian redemption narrative can overshadow politics, I do not share Caron's sense that O'Connor negates political engagement through religion. In "Parker's Back" the political questions of race and gender inform the theological interests. For a recent example of scholarship that skillfully demonstrates the depth and pervasiveness of O'Connor's

theological and philosophical concerns while neglecting the historical specificity of her incarnational vision, see Srigley.

- ² Notable examples of scholarship from the 1990s that pursue questions similar to Michael Kimmel's include Wiegman and Bordo. While these studies provide theoretical and cultural studies approaches to race and gender, critical works on O'Connor take up similar concerns. However, Rath notes in the introduction to *Flannery O'Connor: New Perspectives* that near the time of publication, Ralph C. Wood called for critics to consider more fully the issue of race in O'Connor's works, indicating an underdeveloped critical engagement with this aspect of her writing (Rath 11).
- ³ Richard Giannone recounts the story of her refusal to meet James Baldwin in 1959 and claims that "Even the times cannot excuse her refusal . . ." (76). Though certainly racist overtones factored into her decision, her letter to Maryat Lee adds the complicating factor that she said she was "just back from Vanderbilt and have had enough of writers for a while, black or white. Whoever invented the cocktail party should have been drawn and quartered" (25 Apr. 1959, *HB* 329). Emotional, physical, and social exhaustion may have had as much to do with her refusal as her hesitancy to disrupt the segregationist views of fellow Georgians. On the issue of gender, Katherine Hemple Prown argues that O'Connor's immersion in New Criticism while studying at the Iowa Writers' Workshop led to belief in "the deficiencies of the female intellect" which early stories like "The Crop" seek to demonstrate (43). In the much later story "Parker's Back," Sarah Ruth becomes the figure of heresy while Parker is slightly more sympathetic.
- ⁴ Sarah Ruth's particular belief that God is only a spirit and therefore "don't look" (*CW* 674) does not have a name, though it appears to deny any sense of God's incarnation. Christ's role in her theology is severely diminished, and O'Connor may be suggesting that she cannot even be considered a Christian. If Christ does figure into her theology, but with significantly diminished humanity, then the early church would call it monophysitism, the denial of Christ's human nature.

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