

Epilogue from “Reconfiguring Religion, Race, and the Female Body Politic in American Fiction by Women, 1859-1911” by Randi Lynn Tanglen

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EPILOGUE

FEMINIST AND RELIGIOUS LEGACIES

My paternal grandmother, Recall “Rickey” Kittleson Tanglen, was an evangelist. She wasn’t a preacher or a church leader in any official capacity. As a woman who lived in rural eastern Montana in the mid-twentieth century, she was formed by the traditional gender roles of her time and place that prevented her from accessing those types of influential and official church leadership positions. Rather, my Grandma Rickey had a heart for starting Lutheran home mission churches. In the 1960s and 1970s, she organized several small churches on the plains of eastern Montana and western North Dakota. To this day, these churches are some of the strongest and most active in that particular evangelical Lutheran denomination. But even though she is remembered among those who knew her for her deep Christian convictions (and her famous fudge frosting recipe), she also had a reputation for stirring up the conflicts of church politics. For example, even though she worked tirelessly to recruit new members to the home mission churches she started, she always refused to become a formal member of the mission churches. This is curious because church member rolls had a direct impact on the sustainability of a new church.

The analysis of her son, my father, suggests that what many regarded as my grandmother's difficult or inflammatory personality was most likely her redirected frustration with living in a cultural and historical moment that did not provide her, as a woman, with an appropriate outlet for her remarkable talents. Although she put considerable time and energy into starting these grassroots churches, as a woman she was never allowed to be part of the formal leadership structure of male pastors and elders. Due to her very conservative social and political perspectives, my Grandma Rickey never would have called herself a feminist. But it could be that withholding her church membership was her own unwitting form of feminist protest.

My grandmother died when I was just five years old, and although my childhood memories are tinged with her presence, I only have vague recollections of this extraordinary woman. But growing up, I had positive experiences attending one of the churches that she started. However, as a teenager, I developed a feminist consciousness due to the discrepancies I noticed between the church practice of valuing and affirming me as a young woman and the official church policy of limiting the role of women in the church. Unlike my Grandma Rickey, I lived in a time and place where I could find an outlet for my feminist discomfort with institutions like the church. I pursued graduate studies in the fields of women writers and feminist critical theory and found the analytical frameworks I needed to think through these dilemmas. But I suspect that my development into a feminist scholar can be traced back to Grandma Rickey's frustrations as a conservative evangelical Christian woman living in rural Montana communities.

Due to this legacy in my own life, I am aware of the ways that the influences of religion can be misunderstood and over-simplified. This must be why I bring to my

analyses of literature the impulse to explore the ways in which literature can be used to express religious complexities. I opened this dissertation with the suggestion that because religion is a dynamic force in American literature, we need to integrate the examination of religion into already existing modes of critical analysis. As I expand on my scholarship, my goal is to make the analysis of the intricacies of religion a more central concern to the field of American literary studies, especially to the study of nineteenth-century American women writers. This project illustrates how analyzing literature through the lens of religion can highlight nuances of race, gender, and female sexuality in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women's fiction.

With this project, I am one of the first to offer a sustained and comparative feminist analysis of the manifestations of religion embedded in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American women's writing. Religion is encoded and interwoven into all of their texts as these four authors use religious concerns to express their visions of the nation's destiny and the role of women in that future. Separate spheres methodology, the traditional feminist approach to nineteenth-century American literature, assumes the homogeneity and transparency of women's religious experiences. I complicate this approach by revealing the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion; I thereby show that religion is a dynamic, but often overlooked, force in literature written by women. By providing the historical and cultural contexts of religion, I demonstrate the unexpected ways in which Stowe, Wilson, Ruiz de Burton, and Gilman all call upon and contest religious ideologies to express disparate conceptualizations of the nation and national identity.

In the future, as I develop the ideas and texts that I introduced in this iteration of my project, I envision continuing to explore the transformation of millennial hopes into the ideologies of Manifest Destiny. I have in mind several texts that use religious discourse to express the white and nativist cultural anxieties surrounding U.S. cultural imperialism and white nation building. The popular novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote three spiritualist novels that are all set in heaven: *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1883), and *The Gates Between* (1887). For the most part, these novels portray only white characters and white spirituality, indicating that celestial citizenship and national citizenship are somehow intertwined. These novels thereby contribute to what Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* calls “the colonization of the afterlife” and reveal the implication that the American impulse to expand borders is not limited to the earthly realm (220).

The anti-Catholic convent captivity narratives that I used to contextualize the portrayal of Lola’s sexual and religious purity in Ruiz de Burton’s *Who Would Have Thought It?* reveal Protestant anxieties about Irish immigration and the nation’s westward expansion in the 1830s and 1840s. In the late nineteenth-century, the downtrodden and abused Mormon wife displaced the raped nun in exposés of polygamy written by Mormon women. These narratives, such as Ann Eliza Young’s *Wife No. 19, Or, The Story of Life in Bondage* (1875), are another religiously-inflected and gendered genre that indicate concerns over cultural authority in the West. Convent captivity narratives and antipolygamy literature have received almost no critical attention from literary scholars. I am interested in both types of narratives because they use the rhetoric of

female sexual purity as a strategy to retain Protestant religious and cultural authority on the emerging frontiers.

My own legacy of religious contradictions and complexities brought me to this scholarly undertaking. It wasn't until a few years ago, when my father explained to me my grandmother's unspeakable frustrations with the church's male leadership structure, that I began to consider her—and myself—in a new light. I had always imagined Grandma Rickey as a complacent and unquestioning conservative Christian woman. Appreciating her own frustrations and incongruities helped me come to terms with the internal conflict I sometimes feel between my religious background and my identity as a feminist scholar. In short, understanding my grandmother's struggles with religion helped me better understand myself and my own motivations for making a career out of the feminist analysis of literature and culture. Similarly, looking to American literary history in order to understand the complex ways religion is knit into American thought and social structures can help us better comprehend and respond to our own present historical and cultural moment, which continues to be infused with the dynamics of religion and contested religious ideologies.