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## **The Care of the Self and Christian Practice: Foucauldian Readings of Breece D’J Pancake**

“Foucault’s reading of the Christian experience was selective, but it was decisive in expanding his horizon beyond modernity, and especially beyond power-knowledge relations, to include subjectivity,” writes James W. Bernauer in his book *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics For Thought* (162). This “reading” of Christian experience in the work of Foucault forms a fascinating thread in the work of his ethical phase, one that has been remarked not only by Bernauer but also by such others as Deleuze. In an interview, Deleuze interprets Foucault’s reading of Christian experience as follows: “So there’s a Christian morality but also a Christian ethics/aesthetics, and all sorts of conflicts and compromises between the two” (114). What strikes me initially about these fascinating commentaries on Foucault’s reading of the Christian experience is their incompleteness and potential for further discussion.

One could argue that a more nuanced understanding of what Deleuze rather broadly calls “Christian ethics/aesthetics” is less than central to the continuing conversation around Foucault’s concept of the care of the self, but I disagree. I feel that further critical review on this matter will contribute meaningfully to Foucault’s late work on ethics and on new possibilities for subjectivity. This essay will strive to answer the following questions that emerge directly from Foucault’s ethical work: What struggles and crises exist at the center of a contemporary self that would seek both to embrace a Christian identity and to aestheticize an existence as an ethical being in the world? How might the attempts of Christians to practice a care of the self produce a field of

discourse that intervenes in both Foucault's understandings of self-care and Christianity's understandings of self-renunciation? What is to be learned by closer readings in and around these "all sorts of conflicts and compromises" that Deleuze references?

"The Christian self is an obscure text demanding permanent interpretation through ever more sophisticated practices of attentiveness, concern, decipherment, and verbalization," writes Bernauer in his efforts to describe Foucault's theory of Christian experience (164). This Christian self appears in Foucault as caught up in the discomforts and constant struggles that inhere to Christian practices of self-knowing. Foucault sees these practices as a site of paradox that disrupts the care of the self. He argues, "[T]o seek one's salvation definitely means to take care of oneself. But the condition required for attaining salvation is precisely renunciation" (*Ethics* 289). This observation of a paradox at the juncture of Christian identity and Christian practice ramifies throughout Foucault's ethical work, and touches directly upon his concerns with pastoral power, the issue of confession, and the problematization of sexuality. This essay will seek to explore the shape of a particular strain of Christian identity as it strives toward a practice of self-care, while struggling within and against a technology of power that seeks to manipulate the very elements of the body. Foucault refers to disciplinary power as requiring of the body "a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour" (*Discipline and Punish* 138). With disciplinary and pastoral forms of power having replaced sovereign power according to the Foucauldian model, what forms of Christian subjectivity might be accessible? Foucault suggests that the modern diagram of power relations has necessitated a "zeal for the self" (*Ethics* 293). Given the Christian focus on self-renunciation, how can Christian subjectivities acknowledge this necessary zeal and remain within their religious traditions?

I have chosen the literary work of a particular writer, specifically the American writer Breece D'J Pancake, as a lens through which to focus my discussion of this struggling strain of Christian identity and selfhood. This lens

offers an admittedly narrow view of an admittedly narrow strain of Christian practice, but let it be noted that this essay aims more at an augmentation of Foucault's understanding of Christian identity and practice than at a redirection or summation of his work on this area of inquiry. Through close readings of Pancake's fiction, I will explore the possibilities for, and conflicts engaged by, a practice of self-care that is also a Christian practice. While Pancake's characters are always only fictional representations of such a practice, they nevertheless are useful to Foucauldian criticism as imaginative explorations of Christian selfhood in the context of a network of power relations. Pancake's characters variously experience this network as constricting, bewildering, and exhilarating, and his stories depict their experiences of selfhood as formed from within and impacted by this network. These characters' formations of selfhood and identity will be read here against the backdrop of Foucault's reading of Christian experience.

Breece D'J Pancake achieved critical acclaim for his short stories, some of which were published in *The Atlantic* during the 1970s (Wilhelm 39). He died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1979, but his literary reputation grew in the years after his death. His posthumous collection entitled *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* was widely acclaimed and was even nominated for the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Douglass 102-103). The characters in Pancake's gritty, realistic stories are Christians from his native West Virginia, members of an American subculture marked by poverty, pensiveness, and yearning for escape. In his critical and biographical study of Pancake, Thomas E. Douglass remarks that "Pancake's fictional characters exist on the periphery of the American mainstream" (94). These characters also show evidence of Christian belief systems and identities as central elements, and Christianity appears in Pancake's work in dialogue, theme, and symbolism.

Pancake's focus on Christian identities and religious elements in his characters' daily lives has been connected by numerous critics to his biography. Douglass reveals that Pancake was raised "in a Methodist family" prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1977 while attending the University of

Virginia as a graduate student (77, 73). Cynthia Kadohata adds that Pancake “took to religion as intently as he took to everything he did” (43). It is clear from a reading of his stories that Christian experience represents an important enough element in his literary landscape to merit a range of explorations through a variety of characters and instances, always emerging from these stories as close to the center of the characters’ lives.

Douglass observes also that Pancake’s characters share the experience of feeling “alienated” (9), and that “all of Pancake’s characters...are terribly lonely, isolated not only by economic and social circumstances but also by their own belief in tragedy” (7). Often, the isolation and marginality of these characters translates to obscurely rendered efforts at communication. Not only are dialogues and inner monologues marked by an obscurity that begs to be made clear, but some events of plot are obscured through Pancake’s crafting of dense texts. It is my contention that Pancake’s characters are isolated not only in the two senses mentioned by Douglass above, but in yet a third sense: in that their experiences and practices of Christianity isolate them in an asceticism that runs contrary to the Christianity-derived pastoral power dynamics of wider society. These are conflicted characters that feel paradoxically compelled to shut themselves off from any number of pastorates in order to become Christian. A closer look at the Christian experience of these fictional characters will add nuance and context to Bernauer’s assessment that, for Foucault, the “Christian self is an obscure text” (164). I will offer this closer look by exploring those moments where the obscured (indeed—also rather obscure) literary texts of Pancake’s fiction embody the Christian self as an obscure text, caught up in the struggle for its own self-care in a network of power relations.

I turn first to a seriocomic short story by Pancake that seems even in its very title to explore Foucault’s concerns with Christian experience and selfhood, “The Salvation of Me.” In this story, a conspicuously nameless narrator tells of his adolescent friendship with Chester, a boy with whom the narrator had worked at a gas station and with whom he co-owned a “Chevy” that promised to deliver on

their dreams of escaping from their boring West Virginia hometown (138). The friendship goes sour when Chester proves more successful at negotiating his escape from the self-denying life of the West Virginia town than the nameless narrator. "All I know for sure is that Chester made it big," says the narrator, "and came back to show it off," (134). Chester has managed to make a name for himself in show business after running off to Cleveland in the Chevy, later ending up as a successful Broadway actor in New York while the narrator is stuck working as a gas station attendant back home (141-144).

The narrator is frustrated for several reasons. He obviously misses having the car that he co-purchased, but he also feels that his own dream of achieving selfhood in the wider, more exciting world has been squashed. Early in the story, the narrator recalls his obsession with traveling to Chicago to become an on-air personality at his favorite radio station there. The narrator half-jokingly recalls, "Chicago became a dream, then more of a habit than pubescent self-abuse, replaced beating off, then finally did what the health teacher said pounding the pud would do—made me crazy as a damn loon" (134). The narrator fondly remembers his stifled dream of achieving social status and a more exciting selfhood, here with a notable comparison to "self-abuse." Just as the high school health teacher mentioned above warns the narrator of a need to vigilantly problematize his sexual practices, the narrator's guidance counselor shows up later in the story to analogously warn the narrator of the need to police his dreams against problematically unrealistic goals toward self-affirming achievement after high school. The narrator reveals to his guidance counselor that he aspires to escape his rural environment and become a Chicago radio personality like his hero, whose name, Dex Card, stands in stark, flashy contrast to the narrator's namelessness (140). The guidance counselor brusquely tells the narrator, "Well, you'll have to go to college for that, you know" (140).

This revelation to the narrator starts him on a never-completed path toward the titular "salvation," with his efforts to boost his grades, obtain financial support for college, and become a practicing Catholic. This segment of the story

involves the narrator's growing relationship with his boss at the gas station, Pop Sullivan. Pop offers to help the narrator achieve his selfhood and his dream, saying, "You need a college sponsor. I need another Catholic in this town" (142). The narrator agrees begrudgingly to convert to Catholicism and plan for college in Chicago under the mentorship of Pop Sullivan. But his plans are eventually derailed, as the narrator's dreams of achieving status in wider society are cut short by that society's insistence on his establishment of a hermeneutics of his sexual practice. Foucault tells us of "how an 'experience' came to be constituted in modern Western societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a 'sexuality,' which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints" (*Use of Pleasure* 4). Having moved on from his earlier status as subject of a sexuality in which he was warned against "pounding the pud," our narrator finds himself faced with a new system of rules and constraints when he starts dating the daughter of the police deputy. Pancake's prose here depicts his narrator's experience of Christian selfhood as mediated by systems of pastoral power over the narrator's sexuality:

Deputy's daughter missed a couple of months and decided it was me, and it probably was, so she joined me in catechism and classes at the community college in Huntington, and we lived in a three-room above Pop's station. The minute Deputy's daughter lost the kid, Deputy had the whole thing annulled, and Pop made me move back in with my old man. My old man started drinking again. I quit school, but stayed on at Pop Sullivan's garage to pay him back, and it was about then that I saw the time had gone by too soon. (143)

These rather devastating lines, using the same matter-of-fact, seriocomic tone found throughout the story, set forth the compromised nature of the narrator's salvation, a salvation mentioned in the story's title. The narration's participation in what Foucault would call "regulated and concerted systems" (*Power* 338) of disciplinary power begins with his journeys toward salvation in a variety of forms (all of them centered around escape from his town), and it culminates here

in his ending up back where he started, his efforts toward salvation and attainment of selfhood revealed ultimately as doomed efforts. The narrator's embrace of a Christian experience in this story comes about only as a corollary that he deems necessary to attain his dream (a secular "salvation") of attending college and eventually becoming a radio personality in Chicago. The time for salvation had gone by too soon, and the narrator is left nameless and anonymous in his hometown.

To refer again to Foucault's understanding of power, the exercise of a dynamics of pastoral power between the narrator and his mentors and elders in the town is practiced "through the production and exchange of signs" (*Power* 338). The deputy's daughter's missed menstruation signifies for all parties the couple's sexual practice as an area of problematization. This signifier is hazy for the narrator, who only confesses that "it probably was" his baby, but the results are nevertheless swift and essentializing. The mother of the narrator's baby is immediately transformed, seemingly without protest, in a number of ways. She moves in with the narrator and joins him as both catechumen and college student (both new identities) under the mentorship of Pop Sullivan. Her eventual miscarriage prompts agents of power in her life to recode her once again as "deputy's daughter," with the deputy himself stepping in as policing agent to annul the marriage and relationship. The narrator abandons his efforts to attain his dream of self-fulfillment in college and in Chicago for a return to anonymity at the garage back home. The narrator's project of care of the self remains unfinished.

The depressingly fatalistic note struck by "The Salvation of Me" centers around what Foucault called "the principle of 'desiring man'" (*Use of Pleasure* 5) as it affects the experiences of the narrator. The narrator introduces his status as a sexual subject casually, first in his narration of his "self-abuse" and later in his narration of his relationship with the deputy's daughter. The "self-abuse" is brought up as a habit that seems to preexist the events of the story, and the replacement of it is considered as a stage in his attainment of the selfhood that

never arrives. Such a sequencing is evidenced by the narrator's juxtaposition of his two subsequent dreams, the first an erotic one about his math teacher, and the second his larger and more alluring dream of becoming a Chicago radio personality (134-135). As the narrator's desiring subjectivity grows into this larger effort toward social climbing and self-fulfillment, a hermeneutics of his sexual practice is arranged around his relationship with the deputy's daughter. He is constrained to determine whether he has impregnated her, and from there his independence is staked on the ability of the young couple to carry the child to term and to live within the rules of Christian marriage. While the narrator is himself an active participant in these power relations that affix to him the status of desiring man, his passive acceptance of this status foreshadows the crumbling of his dream. In this story, the subjectivity with which the narrator constitutes a selfhood enters him into a network of power relations in which his possibilities for pursuing dreams are limited. "The exercise of power," argues Foucault, "is a 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities" (*Power* 341). The experiences of Christian practice and of entry into a wider social stage for this narrator teach him only to give up on care of the self within what he perceives as a self-annihilatory social landscape.

"The Salvation of Me" culminates with a brief encounter between the narrator, still stuck working at the gas station, and his old friend Chester, who has returned to town as a Broadway star. Chester pretends not to recognize his old friend, and he quickly speeds away in his "new Camaro" (143). After this brief and frustrating encounter, the narrator discloses that his present humdrum life of working for Pop Sullivan is marked by two consolations. The first is that Chester was later "chewed up and spit out by New York because he thought his shit didn't stink," and the second (and seemingly contrary) consolation takes the form of musing about "little plays" of what exciting events might occur in Chester's present life traveling around America (144-145). After admitting that his musing sometimes leads him to lackadaisical attendance to his chores at the gas station, the narrator states, "Every time that sort of thing happens, I cross

myself with my left hand and go out whistling a chorus of 'Chicago'" (145). In this act, the narrator subverts one of the many rules and restrictions that he sees as having entered his experience with his Christian catechism (the Sign of the Cross), and he wistfully sings the alluring song that led him toward a promise of self-fulfillment in the first place.

Christian practice in "The Salvation of Me" seems to manifest itself in the characters' lives in constricting and self-limiting ways, stripped of any salvific meaning. The Christian practice prescribed to the nameless narrator in his catechism is not self-limiting because of any relation to the ascetic practices of the early Christians that Foucault writes about, but rather because of its connection to what Bernauer calls "the prisons of a particular historical determination" (181). The Christianity of some of Pancake's characters, such as Pop Sullivan, seems to be rooted amorphously in social restriction and disciplinary power, with little regard for programs of self-care, perhaps even with little focus on individual salvation. Though Pop ambiguously is said to remark, "I need another Catholic in this town," we do not know if the need is for solidarity and support in a journey of faith, or for sheer population growth. Most of the other manifestations of Christianity in "The Salvation of Me" appear in the form of external and momentary practices such as the aforementioned Sign of the Cross or the identification of a Roman Catholic as a "mackerel-snapper" (142). This narrative landscape is filled with externally manifested Christian codes that intrude upon the protagonist's efforts at self-realization, but these codes are never experienced as meaningfully productive of (or even compatible with) salvation. Thus, the story's title may refer not to the protagonist's aspirations toward a brighter future, nor to any lived experience of salvation on his part, but rather (and ironically) to a series of historically contingent practices imposed upon him and encoded as Christian.

Various signifiers (spoken and acted) of Christianity are found throughout Pancake's fiction, some of them sharing this same fleeting, offhanded nature. Christian experience is explicitly manifested only in the form of colloquial

expressions in Pancake's story "The Scrapper," where a minor character remarks, "Lord's abotherin' me for marvelin' at the devil's work" (104). In the story "A Room Forever," the narrator speaks of staring into the eyes of a hopeless person and coming upon "a look like the Wrath of God" (60).

Similarly, the landscape of the story "First Day of Winter" is marked by traces of Christian practice hovering against a backdrop of a story about a young man contemplating the murder of his parents. At the story's end, for instance, the protagonist struggles to sleep at the end of a grueling day, faced with the financial failure of his family farm and his inability to support his parents in their old age. Pancake writes, "He...heard his mother's broken humming of a hymn. He lay that way in the graying light and slept. The sun was blackened with snow, and the valley closed in quietly with humming, quietly as an hour of prayer" (169). In this ambiguous ending, the Christian hymn could be interpreted as the symbol of an internalized morality, sustaining the protagonist as he defeats his sinful urge (revealed several paragraphs earlier) to smother his parents in their sleep. Conversely, the humming of the hymn could be read as a purely external sound that serves as the prelude to the smothering without bearing upon it morally. This is to say that Pancake's invocation of the Christian experience in this story could reveal that experience as either deeply significant in a moralizing discourse, or as significant only in its role as a surface-level marker of daily life. Is the mother's humming of a hymn an act that reminds her son of his moral obligation not to kill, or an act that will pleasantly accompany her quiet death by smothering? In either case, the markers of Christian identity are significant for the realistic landscape of Pancake's fiction.

In Pancake's story "Fox Hunters," the characters' Christian identities are again presented against a backdrop that might be viewed as either immoral or amoral. The protagonist of this story, Bo, is a teenage boy who gets invited to go fox hunting with some fellow auto mechanics. Bo's feisty temper has gotten him in trouble at his after-school job at the autobody shop, and so he feels compelled to join the men on their hunt despite his lack of interest in fox hunting. Before

leaving his house to join the men, he trades harsh remarks with his mother over dinner. The story then reads as follows: “TV movie looks like a good ‘un tonight’ she said *in penance*” (75, italics added). The shape of their conversation is marked by a continual attention to the hermeneutics of their sinful desires. When they try to hurt each other with words, these characters feel compelled to do a penance with a subsequent statement. The shape of conversation is thus depicted as a continual chain of self-questioning and the renunciation of one’s desires. After his mother offers an invitation to watch a movie as penance, Bo says, “Gotta date at the dance in Helvetia” (75). This lie covers up his decision to attend the sinful fox hunt, and thus lengthens the chain by which these conversing parties practice their own hermeneutics of desire.

The nocturnal hunt plays out as a scene in which the men boast of sinful deeds and pervert the daytime morality of their Christian society and its apparatuses of power. The fox hunters sit around a campfire getting drunk and discussing a car accident that day that had taken the lives of two local girls. One hunter makes fun of Bo’s silence during the irreverent boasting of sexual exploits and says, “He’s sittin’ in the Holy Seat” (80). The conversation continues to dwell on forbidden acts until several of the hunters imply that they had had sex with one of the female crash victims repeatedly during her life (80). Another hunter named Virg suggests in a shocking joke that the men should dig up her corpse for the purposes of necrophilia (80). Bo sits contemplating this amoral discourse with a brooding hatred of the men who boast about the rape of a young girl, reconsidering his once-solid sense of belonging and identity within this group. He is drawn ineluctably into a self-examination of his desire based on his status as a participant in this “fox hunt.” If he is jokingly implicated by one hunter as a confessor-priest figure (“sittin’ in the Holy Seat” and listening to the boasts), his status is a more silent one, with the priest’s capacity for absolution rendered unimportant. Bo reaches only the conclusion that his need for unearthing the truth of his own and his fellow hunters’ sexual practice and subjectivity is a need that could require lifelong attention: “But the men had whittled the time away

telling lies mingled with truth until Bo could no longer distinguish between the two. He had told things, too; no truth or lie could go untold. It was fixed now; the truth and lies were all told" (81). This admixture of truth and lies, all of which must be told, instantiates a perverted focus on what Foucault calls "the truth of the self" (*Fearless Speech* 165). This nocturnal event presents the frightening underside of Bo's community, a community in which a "Christian technology of the self" must be practiced, but in which violations of Christian morality seem more frequent and emphatic than adherences to Christian morality (*Ethics* 254).

In this story, as with so many of Pancake's stories, only the faintest note of the possibility of escape is sounded at the end. Bo returns from the fox hunt the next day, thoroughly sickened by the perverse confessions of his fellow hunters, none of whom seem interested in achieving salvation despite the thoroughness of their transformations of desire into discourse. The story concludes, "As he lurched down the clay timber-trail toward the secondary, he wondered if the Impala would be ready to roll by spring" (82). It is unclear whether he will leave the variety of Christian experience offered to him by the members of his community for a life elsewhere, but it is made clear that he is dissatisfied with his community's stultifying and unproductive hermeneutics of the subject. The hermeneutics of sexual desire practiced by the boasting fox hunters takes the external form of the confession, but then indulges in the disclosing of worse and worse sins as an end in itself.

Bernauer suggests that, in Foucault's understanding of the Christian technology of the self, "[o]ne relentlessly pursues the truth of one's identity, which is hidden far from one's conscious awareness and shows itself as tied to the dimension of desire and sexuality" (167). Bo may manage to leave his town behind in his Impala and pursue the truth of his Christian identity, without the same sort of subjectivity as an ever-sinning desiring man that the fox hunters revel in. For Reva, the protagonist in Pancake's religious allegorical story "The Mark," the truth of her identity is relentlessly pursued at the same time as she struggles to avoid an awareness of its implications. Reva identifies herself closely

with her sexual desires and the obscure acts that have resulted from them throughout the story. Through an omniscient third-person point of view, Pancake reveals Reva's incestuous longings for her brother Clinton and then shares that "she had traded dark secrets with her brother" in a tobacco field (91). Reva inhabits an identity so thoroughly marked by her obscure sexual subjectivity that she experiences a physical embodiment of her desiring selfhood throughout the story. "She tried to blame Clinton, her parents, even the river, but opened her eyes to the white knuckles of her tiny fist," writes Pancake (92). Reva cannot escape the relentless pursuit of the truth produced by her status as sexual subject because she finds it imbricated in her very physical being.

This imbrication seems to have resulted from her recent pregnancy, a pregnancy whose beginning and ending are situated in the obscure texts of her sexuality. The third-person narrator, though omnisciently offering most of Reva's thoughts, never discloses whether the pregnancy resulted from Reva's incestuous union with Clinton, or from sex with "her husband of two winters," Tyler (90). And the pregnancy, which is not carried to term, may have ended in either a miscarriage or an abortion. The narrator never discloses which of these occurred, nor what Reva's feelings were at the end of the pregnancy. Instead, the reader only encounters the following obscure piece of dialogue: "I done it,' Reva said...She looked up on the porch to her husband. 'I done a awful thing, T.'" (99). Reva may have felt guilty about either her incestuous union with Clinton, or perhaps about the termination of her pregnancy, or perhaps both, but what *does* rise to the surface of this obscure text is her close identification with her own practices as sexual subject. An application here of Foucault's understanding of Christian practices of self-confession suggests that she has constituted herself as a subject with the doing of this "awful thing," and now she feels the need as a Christian to transform this deed into discourse "through the endless mill of speech" (*History* 21). By using the obscuring phrase "awful thing," she is also practicing the careful neutralization that Foucault isolated as an attribute of the confession of sexual practice (*History* 21). In Reva's simple (and yet ambiguous)

confession of “I done it,” her status as a sexualized subject is observable in her simultaneous expression of self-attentiveness and self-renunciation. Douglass argues that this ambiguous confession “suggests many admissions of the soul” (129). Reva’s experience of Christian identity as a subject inscribed with her own misdeeds is accompanied at the story’s end by a wish to obscure the text of her own desiring subjectivity beyond all need for hermeneutic work, by reversing the passage of time. Pancake writes, “She felt her belly for the child that had never been, and almost wanted the deed undone, even forgotten” (98). Her internal struggle within a particular type of subjectivity at this moment in the story recalls Bernauer’s suggestion that “seditious sexuality signals the need for a struggle with one’s self” (163). Reva’s body and sexualized subjecthood serve as hard-to-forget signifiers within the complex and murky text that she constantly reads and attends to, the text of her own self.

Though some of Pancake’s characters glimpse fleeting possibilities for a new practice of Christianity, the close readings offered above depict the prospects for a care of the self that follows Christian practice, Christian morality, and Christian identity as quite grim. Christianity, in many of the stories, first enters the realm of experience of these characters largely in surface-level fragments of a faith that is then practiced only vestigially, or else its practice impacts their participation in power relations in ways that have at times frustrated and denied selfhood. How might the Christian subject aestheticize his/her existence in accord with the principles of *epimeleia heautou* and still remain Christian? Or is Foucault correct to speculate that this an irresolvable paradox within contemporary Christian practice (*Ethics* 285)? Pancake asserts that this paradox has its imaginable resolutions within Christianity, and he presents such possibilities for Christian care of the self most centrally in his story “In the Dry.” As with other Pancake stories, the protagonist’s discovery of a mode of Christian practice that incorporates self-care rather than self-denial occurs only near the story’s end.

This story starts by detailing the protagonist's visit to his foster parents' home in the West Virginia hills. The protagonist, Ottie, has become a "scab trucker" and returns to his former home to find the scars of his past still raw. He encounters the aftermath of a car wreck that left his foster brother Buster disabled (149), the unconsummated relationship of sexual desire with his foster sister Sheila (160), and the angry, vengeful preaching of his "Bible-beater" foster father (157). Ottie's visit is marked by his confusion as to how his own Christian identity fits with the disenchanting interactions he has within his Christian foster family's dynamics. His foster father has long resented and suspected Ottie for his role in the car wreck that injured Buster. "God forgive my wore-out soul," the foster father says to Ottie, "but I hope you burn in hell" (161). Rather than welcome home his prodigal son, the father berates his foster son with menacing words and "false power" (157). It is noteworthy that this harsh remark is prefaced by the foster father's surrender of his own soul as a "wore-out" entity, ostensibly positing his existence as (in his view) beyond any project of self-care.

In the father's preaching before a gathered crowd of local families before dinner, he invokes the Biblical passage that gives its name to the story as he emphasizes the sinfulness he sees in his hearers: "For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (157). Ottie's reflections upon the preached passage reveal his efforts to construct a Christian identity apart from his father's vengeful "Bible-beater" discourse. Sheila shares a flirtatious moment with Ottie after dinner and questions her father's practice of Christian ethics/aesthetics. Pancake writes, "She snorts a small laugh, holds the back of her hand to her forehead, mocks: 'Oh dear. What *shall* we do in the dry?'" (159, italics in original). Ottie's response reveals his search for a Christian identity that allows him to practice a care of the self: "Blow away, I guess" (159). Ottie finds a way out of a question that his foster father's preaching, almost nihilistic in its accusations of the permanence of sinful subjecthood, has flung at him.

Ottie's way out manifests itself as indeed a physical movement outward. He repeats this answer, "Blow away," over and over to himself and eventually

decides to leave his former home and return to his life on the road as a trucker (161-162). The restless, unfixed nature of this life allows Ottie to avoid an occupation of that “dry” zone of sinfulness that the Biblical passage cautions against, while also avoiding the subjectifying discourse within which his foster father had employed the passage. Douglass interprets this ending, with Ottie returning to his life as a trucker, thusly: “His redemption is an ‘awful’ kind like the gears of his departing semi that ‘strain to whine into another night’” (129). Ottie seeks a Christian practice that is not marked by an essentializing self-renunciation that revels in its own sinful nature, but rather by an ascetic self-renunciation that opens up radical possibilities for selfhood. By “blowing away” from any fixed zone of the marked sinner, Ottie explores a new form of self-care, still inclusive of a Christian understanding of encroaching sinfulness, but without the surrenders of the self required by those like his foster father, those who would work toward “the multiplication of the aims and agents of pastoral power” (*Power* 335). Ottie has allowed his selfhood to be obscured and dissipated, to “blow away,” but he has done so in caring for a radical subjectivity rather than in abandoning the project of self-care as his foster father has.

These stories offer a nuanced reading of Christian experience through their imagining of the struggles, conflicts, compromises, and possibilities that mark an epistemically-specific Christian subjectivity. Pancake’s characters identify themselves closely with Christian discourse and practice while inhabiting their West Virginian reality, a setting in which they find it necessary to zealously care for themselves as participants in a network of power relations. They engage projects of care of the self as they escape the boredom of their surroundings (Chester in “The Salvation of Me”), distance themselves from available identities that fail to match their moralities (Bo in “Fox Hunters”), and redirect Christian exegesis toward the exploration of new subjectivities (Ottie in “In the Dry”). These radical Christian subjects set themselves in opposition to various agents of pastoral power as they break from established modes of

subjectivity. Bernauer posits these agents of pastoral power as bound up intimately with subjectivity and manifested in all areas of life:

Although its aims may have become worldly, the effect of state power is to mold a precise kind of individuality with which one's desire is incited to identify. If sexuality is most often the 'seismograph' of that identity, it is because the legacy of the Christian technology of the self is to have linked 'sexuality, subjectivity, and truth' together as the terrain for self-discovery. (166)

Pancake's characters practice this self-discovery with recourse to Christianity, but they seek to avoid the precisely molded subjectivities prescribed for them by a pastoral power that inherits its technologies of power from early Christian practices. They may ultimately accept the individualizing modes of operation of this pastoral power, but they still yearn (as with Reva in "The Mark") for a mode of existence in which self-discovery did not occur at an imagined nexus of sexuality, subjectivity, and truth.

In elaborating Foucault's reading of Christian experience in this way, I follow upon Bernauer's assertion of a "negative theology that characterized the asceticism of Foucault's methods" (179). Foucault insists on a paradox that is to be faced by one who would practice both Christianity and care of the self, questioning the potential for Christian asceticism to lead to meaningful modes of relation to oneself. But Bernauer argues that, while Foucault gave up on the Christian practice of seeking the eternally hidden self, "he also appreciated the 'great richness' of the ascetical moment of self-renunciation" (180). Bernauer extends Foucauldian thought into new regions, observing the possibilities for a Christian subjectivity that articulates a positive self through negative theology, and he argues that Foucault "reintroduced into the contemporary landscape of thought that negative theology that had 'prowled the borderlands of Christianity' for a millennium" (178). I read Pancake's fiction as furthering this implication about Christian subjectivity. Pancake places his stories within a contemporary landscape of Christian and sociopolitical identity, using his West Virginia settings

as the locations of a “borderland” of sorts. In this dark “borderland” between possibilities for subjectivity and self-care, the broken shell of Christian practice inspires some of his more radical characters to reconstruct their statuses as subjects of a faith and theology that resist self-annihilatory discourses in favor of more liberating ones. Bernauer characterizes this possibility for self-care within Christian modes of subjectivity as indicative of a “worldly mysticism” that might emerge from Foucault’s thought (178). “Foucault’s work has opened up a domain,” Bernauer argues, “for the practice of a freedom that stands outside the humanistic program for the conduct of human life and inquiry in history” (178). When Pancake’s characters finally seek an escape from the agents of pastoral power in their communities, they also seek, at the story’s end, to reconstruct their practices of Christianity in accord with emergent projects of care of the self.

Thus, while the above close readings have reaffirmed the idea of the Christian self as an obscure text in need of hermeneutic work, they have also indicated that this Christian self might still be read for all its obscurity. Sometimes it is read by these characters in ways that allow for a fuller relation of self to self rather than a debasement of the self. Foucault speculated (and perhaps hyperbolically) that Christian projects of self-care culminate in the subject’s act of “reminding himself that he is nothing” (*Ethics* 277), but I think this is not always the case. These readings of Pancake suggest that the Christian subject may remind himself instead of his *existence* as an obscure text in a mystic and ascetic act of renunciation, like the “blowing away” of Ottie at the end of “In the Dry.”

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