

# The Local and the Global: Gina Nahai and the Taking up of Serpents and Stereotypes

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Region, home and transnational migration are explored in terms of the transcultural complexities that reverberate through Iranian American Gina Nahai's *Sunday's Silence*. Nahai grapples with stereotypes that attach to the Holiness churches in the east Tennessee region of Appalachia. This essay argues that the novel's politics rest on the intersubjectivity of strangers as bound into a metaphysics of desire. It is through this paradigm that Nahai writes against the reductive association of "minority" literature with discrete "national" models and through which she explores the local and the regional in a culturally complex narrative about the crisis of alterity.

*Sunday's Silence* (2001) by the Iranian Jewish American novelist Gina Nahai is a love story bound up in the secrets that surround a murder within the closed community of the strychnine-drinking, snake-handling Holiness sect. Such groups have traditionally been the clichéd object of scorn and pity, as demonstrated in the continuing controversy around Shelby Lee Adams's photographs or that surrounding the trial of serpent-handling preacher Glenn Summerford in 1992.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to avoid the clichés that this historically "othered" group inspires when snake-handling has been

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<sup>1</sup> Shelby Lee Adams, *Appalachian Portraits* (1993); *Appalachian Legacy* (1998); and *Appalachian Lives* (2003). Adams has photographed poor Kentucky families over the last three decades and been accused of exploiting his subjects for a middle-class audience by perpetuating stereotypes of the rural southern poor in a theatrical sideshow. See, for example, the debate at the heart of Jennifer Baichwal's documentary *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams's Appalachia* (2002). Glenn Summerford was convicted of attempting to murder his wife using snakes and sentenced to 99 years in 1992.

outlawed, handlers prosecuted, and the practice condemned by the Pentecostal Church in which it originally found a place; not to mention the national – and international – media pursuit of “human interest” stories that break in the hollows of the Appalachian mountains when a member of the Holiness congregation is arrested or dies from snakebite.<sup>2</sup> One observer of the ritual muses on the idea of faith as a drug: “Mainlining the Word, I think to myself. That rush of danger is their fix, embracing what they ought to flee, so that fear itself short-circuits the brain, producing a high like heroin.”<sup>3</sup> The image is surprisingly modern among dominant popular representations that render the “old-time religion” out of time, as if it exists in studied resistance to modernity. In fact, most historians agree that “Little” George Went Hensley, an itinerant Pentecostal preacher, should be considered the founder of the Holiness Church. In 1909 or 1910 in rural Tennessee, Hensley concluded a sermon with a flourish, lifting a venomous snake out of a box and handling it in a trance-like state, enjoining the congregation to do the same. Married at least four times and in his seventies when he died in 1955, Hensley was reputedly bitten more than four hundred times. He becomes the model for Gina Nahai’s “Little” Sam Jenkins in *Sunday’s Silence*, a novel that engages not only with stereotypes of snake-handlers and their churches but with images of nomadic Arabs, self-hating Jews, and the French under Nazi rule.<sup>4</sup>

This essay examines the ways in which the novel foregrounds ideas of home, migration, and region and shows how the transcultural complexities inherent in these tropes are represented as uncanny narrative echoes. Nahai delivers a prismatic story in which the closed world of snake-handling in a corner of Appalachia is told through characters’ memories of countries in the

<sup>2</sup> Preachers have reputedly been bitten hundreds of times but survive to continue handling cottonmouths and rattlesnakes, disdaining medical attention in the belief that faith is the only cure. Although the drinking of poison is rare, occasionally a lethal dose of strychnine – a “salvation cocktail” – is imbibed without fatal consequences. These are experiences that defy an outsider’s logic and a media phenomenon that has animated the *National Enquirer* and *The X Files* as often as the *New York Times*.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Dunlap, “The Worm and the Snake,” in Carole E. Hill and Patricia D. Beaver, eds., *Cultural Diversity in the US South: Anthropological Contributions to a Region in Transition* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 190–200, 194.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of Hensley see Thomas Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 41–60. Nahai’s Sam listens to a Pentecostal Holiness preacher citing Mark 16: 17–18 and is inspired to scale a mountain in search of God’s sign. The sign he follows is to pick up a snake and to descend with it into the church, declaring, “This is the spirit of the devil, and it has no power over me.” The congregation freezes. *Sunday’s Silence* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 68. Subsequent references will be included in the text in parentheses.

Middle East and Europe. Rejecting a nostalgic or sentimentalized “home” and extending ideas of homelessness and migration beyond synonyms for loss, *Sunday’s Silence* is a global narrative of religious intolerance and individual and group dispossession. I argue that by locating her novel in a transcultural imaginary and conceiving of the politics of the novel as bound into a metaphysics of desire, Nahai writes against the compartmentalizing of “minority” literature into discrete “national” models. In my reading, the novel hinges on the intersubjectivity of strangers whose tenuous and seemingly bizarre connection is the death of Sam Jenkins. The mystery of his death can only be apprehended, I argue, once it is accepted that what appears to be a culturally specific “local” murder is actually the death of two men whose lives meet at the bloody crossroads at which intolerance intersects with desire in a “global” and culturally complex crisis of alterity.

Nahai opens up a supposedly “closed” region and a charismatic community by seeing it in the mirror of another “closed” world, Kurdistan, closed off by mountains and, like southern Appalachia, supposedly “unpenetrated by strangers (163).<sup>5</sup> In the popular imagination, the Appalachian hills may remain one of the most hermetically sealed and least cosmopolitan areas in America; made up of poor white mountain people, predominantly “Scotch-Irish,” it is supposedly empty of ethnic diversity. The recent anthology *The South in Perspective*, in a section ironically entitled “Appalachia Recognized,” continues to emphasize whiteness as the raw material for fiction, citing Charles Frazier, Fred Chappell and Tony Farley and stating that “Appalachia is still the most isolated and untouched region within the boundaries of the continental United States.”<sup>6</sup> It is with this traditional idea of the region’s cultural and ethnic isolation that Nahai engages. For example, one character – Blue – is a native of Kurdistan and her home, divided among five countries, is described as strangely similar to the Appalachian hills that encompass parts of thirteen states and the whole of West Virginia. Nahai offers a revisionist history of Appalachian separateness and, as argued

<sup>5</sup> The image of the mirror has been deployed by historians, theologians, and anthropologists in their discussions of the Holiness Church. For example, Mary Lee Daugherty asserts, “The handling of serpents as a supreme act of faith reflects as in a mirror the danger and harshness of the environment in which most of these people have lived.” See M. L. Daugherty, “Serpent-Handling as Sacrament,” *Theology Today* 33, 3 (Oct. 1976), 232–243.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Francisco, Robert Vaughn, and Linda Francisco, eds., *The South in Perspective: An Anthology of Southern Literature* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 1057. See William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, eds., *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985) for an early study that tried to disprove this assumption.

elsewhere, *Sunday's Silence* chimes with recent revisionist histories which disturb the region's "scripts of settlement."<sup>7</sup>

Nahai's stated aim for *Sunday's Silence* was to show that "human reactions are strange and unpredictable all over the world ... what happens in the West is just as sad and outrageous as what happens in the East."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is significant that the location she chooses in the West should be the American South, historically demeaned as the "bunghole" of the US, the "Sahara of the Bozart" and "a cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodists, snake charmers, phoney real estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists."<sup>9</sup> Nahai may also be aware of a pejorative analogy made in 1947 by Arnold Toynbee in *A Study of History* when he asserted that "Appalachian 'mountain people'" were "no better than barbarians":

They have relapsed into illiteracy and witchcraft. They suffer from poverty, squalor, and ill-health. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarians of the Old-Fifis, Albanians, Kurds ... but, whereas these latter are belated survivals of an ancient barbarism, the Appalachians present the melancholy spectacle of a people who have acquired civilization and lost it.<sup>10</sup>

The Holiness sect is always already "othered," as are the Kurds, and the Jews and Muslims that make up the network of characters in Nahai's novel.

Nevertheless, the novel wears its politics lightly. This is unsurprising when Nahai has openly criticized political allegory and didactic fiction.<sup>11</sup> Although one main character feels compelled to migrate to hide his Jewish heritage and escaping roots is a powerful drive for others, sexual desire and romantic attachments also account for why characters bridge cultural differences, and lust even accounts for the death of one of them. The democratic principle of the cross-cultural love story or "love plot" is made analogous with

<sup>7</sup> Nabem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith, "Making an Impression: New Immigrants in Southern Fiction," *Forum for Modern Languages*, special issue on "Rethinking the US South," 40, 2 (2004), 214–24.

<sup>8</sup> Nahai Alumni Interview at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/mpw/interviewNahai>.

<sup>9</sup> H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," *New York Evening Mail*, 13 Nov. 1917, in H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection made by James T. Farrell* (New York: Vintage, 1958), 69–82.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Toynbee quoted in Ada Haynes, *Poverty in Central Appalachia* (New York: Garland, 1997), 48–49. Nahai is very aware of the seduciveness of stereotypes of the region. While still conducting early research for the novel, she fell into exaggerated terms in interview: "These people put their faces in blow torches and pile snakes on themselves in these religious meetings they're having ... and this is a growing movement." The published novel is – fortunately – much quieter than this early reference implies. Nahai Alumni Interview.

<sup>11</sup> In her review of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, "Rushdie's 'Clown' No Laughing Matter," she argues that the novel "reads more like a political allegory than great literature; it preaches rather than allows the reader to arrive at her own truth." *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, 28 April 2006, at <http://www.jewishjournal.com/nahai>.

transnational unions. On first impression this involves a certain risk, that of returning the reader to assumptions of the kind that Fredric Jameson made about "Third World" literature: "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."<sup>12</sup> But Nahai's novel confounds attempts to separate out "Eastern" and "Western" cultural models of reading, a compartmentalization that is apparent in, for example, Catherine Belsey's *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994). Belsey denies the possibility of cross-cultural comparison:

And if all this seems ethnocentric, as it is, I want to draw attention to the dangers of imperialism inscribed in anthropology. Just as feminists want men to take us seriously, but not to speak on our behalf, so it is not for me to speak for other existing cultures, whether Third-World or African-American.<sup>13</sup>

Disaggregating feminist struggles, in Belsey's context, from "other" cultures is to deny transcultural ways of knowing. In *Sunday's Silence* Nahai tries to break out of such ideological traps by conceptualizing an affiliative model of intersubjectivity. She does this primarily through emphasizing the similarities between the modes of oppression and repression that her characters experience and the guilt and desire that animate their relationships with others.



*Sunday's Silence* explores an adulterous love affair that takes place in the mid-1970s between a Kurd woman and a southern man. Nahai's primary setting is Knoxville, the "Old City" known generally as the gateway to the South and in fiction through James Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957) and Cormac McCarthy's early work, notably *Suttree* (1979). Foreign correspondent Adam returns home to eastern Tennessee from Lebanon where he has been covering the civil war. He is Sam Jenkins's son, one of many children

<sup>12</sup> Jameson is at his most reductive when discussing "Third World" literature, assuming a national allegory always functions as the determining factor in "under-developed literature" and that "it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts *alien to us* at first approach ..." (my italics). See F. Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," *Social Text* (1986), 65-88, 69. Aijaz Ahmad provides an incisive critique of the three-worlds theory in Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 95-122.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 9-10. Disappointingly, in such an insightful work, in this formulation "other existing cultures" does not preclude a discussion of *Gone with the Wind* though it presumably would have precluded Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, in the assumption that "black" and "white" cultures are not porous, an idea that also persists in the Three-Worlds Theory. See, for example, 92-93.

for whom the itinerant Jenkins is an absent father. Adam feels compelled to investigate his father's murder in order to lay to rest the ghosts in his own past. All he learns from a news report he reads in Beirut is that Sister Blue Kerdi of Knoxville, a member of his father's church, has been arrested for having handed him the snake that killed him – but that she has been released without charge.

Although the novel takes place in the 1970s, it casts back much further in situating Adam firmly in the local via his father's ancestors who settled in Tennessee in the 1830s, his grandmother Rose's meeting with Sam Jenkins in 1912 and his subsequent bigamous relationship with her. Clare's infatuation with the man who has become her stepfather leads to Adam's birth in 1936. Adam's poverty-stricken childhood is spent in fear and awe of the snakes his grandmother keeps under his bed in the rusted old train car that is the family's makeshift home amidst the Kentucky coal camps. Placed in the state orphanage by his restless young mother, Adam grows up traumatized by the experience but equally unsettled by her various attempts to reclaim him until, steely in the face of the orphanage's harsh regime, he graduates high school and leaves the region forever – or so he believes – in the 1950s.

Although local, Adam is a false "norm." He thinks of himself as an acculturated southerner; beaten out of his accent and background during his strict orphanage upbringing, he has lived outside the South for twenty years. He is the perfect insider-outsider for Nahai's purposes: his father disowns him; his mother abandons him; and he has lived in Egypt, Cyprus and Turkey,

covering wars in places that took him as far away from America and her interests as he could travel. He had managed to stay away from Vietnam and Cambodia, did not touch Chile, cared nothing about Watergate ... Only wanted to keep away from home and all its memories. (15)

Adam is a roving reporter in a novel populated by wanderers. He is a local man who has become a stranger, the "archetypal undecidable," to borrow Zygmunt Baumann's formulation, in that he is "neither friend nor enemy ... because he may be both."<sup>14</sup> Adam seems to bring an enabling skepticism to bear on the Holiness sect and the locale: "a culture so unfamiliar to and so hidden from the rest of the world, it did not make sense anywhere beyond the mountains" (37). Yet Nahai makes clear that he is no wiser than any other character in failing to account for the mysterious pull of the Holiness churches, their endurance, or their continued significance as a

<sup>14</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

salve for the poverty that has historically oppressed the people of the region.<sup>15</sup> As the novel progresses, the local becomes increasingly that which is unfamiliar and hidden. For example, subsequent to unfolding Adam's past, Nahai tells the stories of Knoxville residents Blue and her Professor husband, which emphasize the global as bound in to the local in secret and surprising ways.

Blue's past is the Torus Mountains, the Black Sea, the Iraqi deserts and the Sea of Marmora; it is tale of Kurdish revolts and the burning of Kurdish villages, of the forbidden love between her parents that maddened her Jewish mother and broke the heart of her Muslim father. When the Professor chooses Blue as his bride in 1951 – a fourteen-year-old child for a man hiding more than his religion during the Sunni Kurdish wedding ceremony – she becomes privy to his “dark and bleeding secret” (184). The Professor's secret story begins in Basra; takes in Paris during the 1930s, World War II and the Holocaust; and ends in suicide and murder. Adam discovers that his father's death is as much the result of what happened to Blue in Kurdistan and the Professor in Paris as precisely what occurred the day Blue handed Sam Jenkins the snake that killed him.

Blue, born of a forbidden marriage between a Jewish mother and a Sunni Muslim father, is in her own words “a madwoman's daughter, a wild child even my father could not control” (175). She is also an atypical member of the (fictional) Harlan, Kentucky-based Church of Southern Hope and Redemption. As a child Blue lives nomadically, traveling between the mountains of Iran and the valleys of Iraq; as an adult in Knoxville she moves between the poor Holiness Church and a sedate colonial mansion on Knoxville's Clinch Avenue. Initially, Blue seems far removed from the Church's beginnings in decrying brutal “Third World” poverty, unemployment, and disease but she is also a member of a “tribe” of nomads whose history of dispossession resembles that of rural whites from Appalachia. She takes on challenges that other congregants will not, “fighting snakes no one else dared to touch, drinking undiluted poison and setting her body into burning flames, emerging unscathed” (30). Her courage – or recklessness – derives not from her rootedness in the local phenomenon of the Holiness Church but her roots in a culture thousands of miles away from Knoxville.

<sup>15</sup> David L. Kimbrough emphasizes socio-economic factors in that snake handling coincided with the rise of capitalism in the region and coalmining's devastation of the land and folkways so that capitalism is the Devil and the snake is a “symbolic intermediary in the contest with evil capitalists.” D. L. Kimbrough, *Take Up Serpents* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 95.

Adam's obsession to tell his father's story exposes a "northern" disdain for this type of "southern" story. While reports of Jenkins's death and Blue's release from custody have "divided the town of Knoxville," Adam wonders at the lack of journalistic detail about his father's long life: "Most likely the church people and their stories were not important enough to the rest of the country" (18-19). It is a view his editor in Chicago seems to share when Adam decides to investigate and, once the snake-handlers' most recent debacle has been reported, there is no evidence that wider investigations will follow. Only the manner of Jenkins's death makes the headlines. In his search for the story and quest for the truth, Adam begins as the novel's focalizing consciousness. However, Nahai shifts the perspective to Blue, who holds the secrets that have congealed around Sam Jenkins's demise. They share the story: Adam fills in Sam Jenkins's life as Blue fills out the manner of his death and its connection to her husband. Adam finally decides not to report the tragically internecine story of his father's death because the horizon of injustice is much wider than first implied by a local story of life and death in southern Appalachia.

In *Sunday's Silence* serpent-handling is a mirror image through which an aspect of Appalachian culture is reflected from different angles. The characters embark on a series of transatlantic crossings which create an impression of spatial mobility in the novel. The Kurds are nomadic and ethnically diverse peoples who live in a "ghost country," a "nation without a name on any map" (159) and what "local" Adam and "outsider" Blue share is a visceral sense of disconnectedness from family, friendship, and community so that neither "belongs." Blue is irredeemably foreign and ethereal: "She was like the fairy-tale wings on a small child who dreams of flying away - startlingly exquisite, out of place no matter where she went" (144). Nevertheless, she is imprinted with the Kurds' bloody history, beaten but never accepting defeat, a resilience she shares with those she meets in southern Appalachia, especially Adam. In the South, cultural and racial crossovers have historically been expressed in terms of Euro- and African-American norms: as Celtic influences on the Old (white) South, African material traces, or religious rituals and vernacular art. Nahai privileges marginalized individuals and groups, emphasizing parallels in comparative contexts and analogous experiences that are neither Celtic nor African in their relationship with the region. *Sunday's Silence* is a rich mix of local lore and intercultural connections.

Nevertheless, the hardest stereotype to break in Nahai's knotting together of Eastern and Western characters is that of the southern serpent-handling preacher. In fiction Appalachian snake-handlers are among the most



mysterious of subjects, but they are also the stuff of southern Gothic and family melodrama. Gina Nahai casts an outsider's eye on a subject that southern women writers have already explored in fictions including Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1977), Denise Giardina's *The Unquiet Earth* (1992), Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* (1995), Vicki Covington's *The Last Hotel for Women* (1996), and Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend* (2002). The snake-handlers in these novels are usually blustering patriarchs, sometimes violent "plaster saints" but always charismatic – if philandering – husbands and fathers. They add a melodramatic strain to Tartt's small-town mystery and function in timeless counterpoint to the social changes sparked by the civil rights movement in *The Last Hotel for Women*. But, by and large, snake-handling is only one element in a concatenation of cultural events that precipitate personal change for the protagonist. Lee Smith's *Saving Grace* is a notable exception. In a scene early in the book, drunken locals intent on disrupting the worshippers gather together as many copperheads as they can find and release them in a church to the fear of the invaded congregation. When Grace's father, the Reverend Virgil Shepherd, stands his ground and gathers the snakes in his arms, one of the interlopers is converted on the spot: "I went in there as a sinner and a fool ... and come out a true believer."<sup>16</sup> Later Rev. Shepherd embezzles funds and deserts his family and the church, leading his wife to commit suicide. The plot seems to smack of sensationalism but the overall effect is quieter. Smith is well known for her thoughtful, clear-eyed evocations of local culture and folklore in a body of work that includes *Oral History* (1983) and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988).<sup>17</sup> Most significantly in this context, she has consistently refused to explain away the force of belief that underpins the Holiness congregants' faith.<sup>18</sup>

Sam Jenkins is as reminiscent of Virgil Shepherd as he is of other literary portraits. However, he is the least fully realized character and the closest to

<sup>16</sup> Lee Smith, *Saving Grace* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Even writers whose connection to the Holiness Church is familial or personal retain something of the sensational in their work. Novelist Dennis Covington's story began when as a freelance reporter covering the trial of a serpent-handling preacher for the *New York Times* he began to trace his own Alabama ancestors' "dangerous and unloved" white southern past back to snake-handling Pentecostalism in the memoir *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Smith recalls witnessing serpent-handling and most especially a woman about the same age from the same part of Appalachia who even looks like Smith ("I could have been her"). The woman answers her question as to why she engages in something so dangerous with, "When you've had the serpent in your arms, the whole world kind of takes on an edge for you." Smith is "hooked" and "I knew I had to write a novel in order to find out" how she could say such a thing. See Susan Ketchin's interview with Smith for Random House at <http://www.bookclubs.ca/catalogue>.

the cliché that drew Nahai to the region in the first place.<sup>19</sup> Jim Bircckhead has examined media images of southern snake-handling congregations and concludes that they are cast as “other” in an “us”/“them” binary,

as spectacle or carnival sideshow, part of “believe it or not” bizarre adventure genres, the objects of our voyeuristic media gaze. We characteristically peer up or straight ahead at a “snake handler,” who characteristically is portrayed with mouth agape exposing teeth, nostrils flared, face contorted, long straggly hair (on women) hanging down, eyes wild and glazed, grasping a snake or snakes with exaggerated fingers and knuckles at the end of long outstretched arms thrust into the foreground.<sup>20</sup>

The image of the snake handler is as a monstrous grotesque and the Pentecostal Holiness faith is generally presented as emblematic of the ignorance of a despised rural poor. Where Jim Goad in *The Redneck Manifesto* has argued that the “poor white originally entered the national consciousness with a hillbilly clown puppet on one hand and a redneck villain puppet on the other,”<sup>21</sup> the Holy Rollers enter in similarly grotesque style but with a snake in one hand and a bottle of lethal poison in the other. The idea of a “poor white” underclass of degraded humanity has proved a tenacious stereotype promulgated in popular culture from Li'l Abner and Bubba to rural white hill clans, as perpetuated in films such as John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), the adaptation of James Hickey's novel.

The “redneck” and “hillbilly” are useful scapegoats and the image of “poor white trash” has been strikingly resistant to ideological change wrought by either civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s or advocates of political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s. In *Crossfire* (1947), Hollywood's critique of post-war anti-Semitism, southern bigot Monty (Robert Ryan) introduces fellow soldier Lee Roy as a “dumb hillbilly”: “Lee Roy's from Tennessee. He just started wearing shoes ... he's dumb, our secret weapon.” As recently as *Blade II* (2003), a Hollywood film set in an unspecified future in which the marginalized are granted allegorical if outlandish characterization,

<sup>19</sup> When first describing the novel she would go on to write, and in which she would address such stereotypes, Nahai said, “These people put their faces in blow torches and pile snakes on themselves in these religious meetings they're having, and they believe in faith healing. And this is a growing movement. Instead of shrinking, as you would think it would be in the twentieth century, this movement is growing in popularity. These people refuse medical treatment thinking their faith is going to heal them after they've been bitten by snakes and such.” Nahai Alumni Interview.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Bircckhead, “Bizarre Snake Handlers’: Popular Media and a Southern Stereotype,” in *Hill and Beaver*, 163–189, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 86.

Kris Kristofferson's Whistler remains demonized for his "hillbilly ways" in a film crawling with devilish super-vampires. Among the plethora of stereotypes of poor whites, though, only the snake-handlers are reviled for courting death. Jeanne McDonald, who researched three families and their faith, summarizes the situation: "They've been maligned. They've been beaten up. They've been ridiculed. They like to worship in peace."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, only a small minority of Holiness congregants take their litany of faith from the King James Bible, specifically a passage that is usually excised from other versions:

And these signs shall follow them that believe. In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover ... And they went forth and preached every where, and the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. (Mark 16:17-20)

When believers occasionally handle serpents they often do so in makeshift churches, traditionally moving venues not only to spread the word but to evade local sheriffs.<sup>23</sup> It is probable that in total less than a hundred Holiness worshippers have died as a result of snakebite or poison and that only two or three thousand follow as sacrament the Gospel according to Mark. Their visibility at the bizarre edges of a Christian fundamentalist movement is disproportionate to their possible impact or influence. Church historian Bill Leonard, who studied the snake-handling churches, believes:

What the serpent handlers keep saying to us – whether we want to listen or not – is that we all tend to emphasize the parts of the Bible that make us feel comfortable ... We try to make it a tame book. Whatever the serpent handlers teach us, they can teach us that the Bible cannot be domesticated.<sup>24</sup>

The Old Testament act of wounding is a sign that functions simultaneously as "the analogical verification of the existence and authority of God," in Elaine Scarry's explication of pain acting as the force of belief, and as a sign of the non-believer Blue's sensory contact with her traumatized past.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jeanne McDonald, quoted in Diane Tennant, the *Virginian Pilot*, 19 Oct. 2000. See Jeanne McDonald and Fred Brown, *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and their Faith* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Kentucky was the first Appalachian state to make serpent-handling illegal in 1940. In 1966 West Virginia successfully defeated a bill to make the practice illegal and remains the only state where it is not.

<sup>24</sup> Bill Leonard quoted in Terry Mattingly, "Snakes, Miracles, and Biblical Authority," Gospel Communications Network (GCN), 24 July 1996. See Online Christian Resources at <http://www1.gospelcom.net/mattingly>; accessed 12 Dec. 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 213.

Nahai's fiction differs most radically from other stories of serpent-handling preachers and southern Appalachia in that she brings an outsider's vision to the region; she opens up the local to global cultural flows. While Denise Giardina and Lee Smith make use of foreign characters, only Nahai foregrounds their voices and stories. The outsider is rarely given a voice even in a polyvocal Appalachian novel.<sup>26</sup> Even Lee Smith's story of the Cantrell family in *Oral History*, told through a series of monologues, includes only one – Jennifer's – from the perspective of an outsider.<sup>27</sup> In *Sunday's Silence* the multiple perspectives are those of outsiders who assimilate into the local while maintaining their cultural specificities or "difference." Nahai makes Blue ethereal and "other worldly" and in some ways she "passes" as a Holiness woman – in dress and manner at least if not religious fervor – until, liberated by Sam Jenkins's death, she appears in luxuriant, diaphanous, "Eastern" dresses. Her husband, the Professor, remains an aberration, in the Holiness Church and out of it, because he is a serial impersonator who has disguised himself wherever he has made his "home." When Blue first meets him in Kurdistan, for example, he is a "creature" so unlike any man she has seen that he initially seems "a girl dressed in men's clothes" (174).<sup>28</sup> Adam hides from his American "home" in plain sight of danger in war zones around the world; he favors life in a network of cultural nether regions, but his wanderlust is also contrived to replicate his mother's, and to reproduce in perverse fashion the childhood primal fear still lodged in the man, "a small boy asleep in a bed somewhere in the darkness ... with snake boxes under his bed and the fear of his mother's departure in his heart" (222).

What Adam discovers back home in Appalachia is the place Blue has come to love over twenty-four years of making it her home. He learns to see the town again but through her eyes: "its quiet sidewalks, its neglected parks, the spartan gravesites of foolhardy soldiers who had died for the losing

<sup>26</sup> Lusa Landowski is an interesting exception in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), set in rural Appalachia around the Zebulon National Forest. Like Blue, Lusa is of mixed ethnic and religious heritage, describing herself as Polish Arab American; her grandparents were Polish Jews on her father's side and Palestinian Muslims on her mother's. Lusa is a second-generation American of New Yorker parents who enjoys the "mix-and-match" in her background but her story is told in the third person.

<sup>27</sup> Although it should be noted that Rodger Cunningham reads the novel in comparative context when he asserts that "*Oral History* is Appalachia's nearest equivalent to García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," in "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia," in Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe, eds., *The Future of Southern Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41–53, 50.

<sup>28</sup> In context of the rugged nomadic lifestyle of her father and his tribesman, Blue is surprised by the Professor's urbane self-presentation, but the description may also echo longstanding anti-Semitic stereotypes that associated Jewish men with femininity.

cause ... its ghost-ridden hotels, its kudzu-filled backyards ... a fairy-tale world ...” (191). Blue’s fairy-tale Appalachia is a place Adam begins to see because he loves her but also because he has lived in all “the [other] places of Blue’s memories” that color her vision of eastern Tennessee, including the “nation without a name,” Kurdistan among the Kurds, “the children of fairy-tale Jinns and their real-life lovers” (159). Nahai creates a vision of Appalachia through emotional – and almost magical – echoes of Kurdistan, an idea that is reinforced through Adam and Blue’s love and the color imagery that proliferates.

To Adam, Blue is symbolic of his return to Appalachia but she is also like Kurdistan itself, “a ghost country the color of God, a land of silver rocks and lavender plains, of black winds and amber roads and saffron sunsets, so glorious no man has been able to claim them as his own” (159). She seduces him as the green of the Appalachian mountains has seduced him or as the Jinn seduces a man; they have “switched places – he and Blue – switched worlds and continents and yet, in the end, they had arrived at the same truth” (304). Adam is a local, back home in the landscape, if not in the culture. He grew up only an hour from Knoxville but in the orphanage the city seemed “a world away” (33). However, his is the displaced local’s typical love–hate relationship with home. Even in the dark when driving south from the airport in Washington, DC after many years away, he can “see” the “dense green cover of the mountains around him, the soil that was red and gold with strips of glittering black – coal seams like dark crystal” (24). With the dawn, he is struck by “a thousand shades of green – vibrant, deep colors of stunning density and lushness – the earth a stark red, the air bright and glittering with sparkles of light” (26). The grey anonymous life he seeks contrasts with the brilliantly colored palette Nahai uses to show that the locale is infused with the same colors that animate the Middle Eastern sections of the novel. Blue casts a colorful spell over Adam, and on first glance what he retains of her is her color, like the lavender bleach that he saw Arab women using in Beirut that could “change the color of everything it touched into a luminous, unforgettable white” (36).



Like other “minority” writers who take the US South as their subject, Nahai extends definitions of the Christian-European South. *Sunday’s Silence* breaks open assumptions about the homogeneity of (Christian) faith in the 1970s, a period when, as Mary Lee Daugherty observed, in the South there was supposedly “little awareness of other world religions. Even contacts with

Roman Catholics and Jews are rare."<sup>29</sup> Nahai originally conceived of her novel in different terms from its published version, with a Russian "picture bride" becoming a snake-handler in 1920s Kentucky. She does trace Adam's heritage back to the "mine wars" of the 1920s and describes in detail the abandoned coaltowns covered in kudzu in the 1970s. But in the end she maintains her usual emphasis on the Middle East, and the 1970s setting purposely pitches her character into a decade that Jack Temple Kirby opines was "one of the weirdest decades in the nation's tumultuous affair with the South."<sup>30</sup> Nahai eschews a national model of the South as the North's regional other along with an Orientalist model of East and West, favoring a transcultural model in which the region is calibrated by characters whose foreignness, or outsider status, is precisely what they have in common.

Nevertheless, in *Sunday's Silence* Nahai did sidestep away from the literary terrain she had begun to make her own. An Iranian-born Jew, she lives in Los Angeles, and her first two novels, *Cry of the Peacock* (1991) and *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (1997), move between Iran and California, the state where most Iranians chose to settle in the late 1970s. Her fictions are typically magical-realist family sagas in which the interpenetration of Arab and Jewish cultures produces a rich hybrid and her characters' dreams of Iran follow them into the diaspora. The setting of the American South, and more precisely the area of southern Appalachia, seems like a huge geographical leap for Nahai – and a leap of faith from Muslims and Sephardic Kurds to include Christian fundamentalists. However, by locating Blue's childhood in the history of Kurdish battles for independence on the Turkish–Iranian border and the outward migration of a dwindling Kurdish "nation" in an increasingly unstable region, *Sunday's Silence* knots together characters who bring the world elsewhere into the South.

Sudip Bose, reviewing Nahai's novel in the *Washington Post*, believes that the Appalachian-set sections of *Sunday's Silence* are weakened precisely because of Nahai's limited familiarity with the southern terrain. Bose fixes the novel within a dual expectation of authenticity and ethnography, inevitably privileging "realism" over "magical realism." For example, Bose admits to finding the Appalachian world Nahai creates "exotic, terrifying and endlessly alluring" but worries that she chose the "wrong subject" (for "subject" read region and style). Bose bemoans a lack of distinctiveness between the voices of the characters – Blue sounds like Adam who sounds like the

<sup>29</sup> Mary Lee Daugherty, "Serpent-Handling as Sacrament," 235.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 161.

narrator – perhaps expecting a more definitively and semantically “southern” novel.<sup>31</sup> What Bose fails to grasp is that if the South is the North’s “Other,” Appalachia is the “Other’s Other,” a subregion already “marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being.”<sup>32</sup> It is precisely the blurring of notions of southern distinctiveness into other voices and customs that goes to create the syncretic world that is *Sunday’s Silence*, so that when the narrator describes Appalachia as “a world where reality had its own meaning” (37), the meaning has already begun to be sifted through a net of images entwined with other worlds. In this way, the region is more displaced than fetishized. Dissonant voices form the novel’s chorus and its baroque style is infused with fear and regret. In italicized sections, Blue tells her life story to herself as much as to Adam – and to their sometime interlocutor Isiah Frank, a theatrical, gay hotelier and another Knoxville misfit. In this way, Blue’s confession of intent to murder Sam Jenkins is presented as an inevitable consequence of the tangled lives and lies that twist and turn like the snakes she handles for most of the novel.

The dual East–West perspective that so characterizes her earlier work clearly suffuses Nahai’s exploration of the Appalachian region: preconceptions about the “outrageous, or ... violent or backwards” Middle East are brought into sharp focus when funneled through a similarly “backward” and compelling Appalachia: “if you just look around the corner, you see the same kinds of things happening ...”<sup>33</sup> Grappling with stereotypes, if not always explicitly overcoming them, Nahai engages with a predominantly white religious history, the legacy of “embarrassing ... poverty, ignorance, racism, and defeat ... as dangerous as any rattlesnake” that Dennis Covington describes, and the idea of the “poor white” as a “cultural foreigner” that Jim Goad asserts.<sup>34</sup> Nahai denies buying into the litany of clichés about Appalachia and the Holiness Church: “Moonshiners. Revenuers. Snuffy Smith. Religious rapture. Barefoot and pregnant.”<sup>35</sup> The extent to which she succeeds in creating a story that moves through, rather than depends on, clichés is interdependent on the stereotypes of the Middle East that work in similar ways.

Nahai perceives a similarity between the Holiness churches and fundamentalist Islamic practices, especially through the roles of Holiness women and Muslim women in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the

<sup>31</sup> Sudip Bose, “Caught in the Coils,” *Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Cunningham, “Writing on the Cusp,” 42.

<sup>33</sup> Gina Nahai Alumni Interview.

<sup>34</sup> Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 151; Goad, *Redneck Manifesto*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Marcos McPeck Villatoro, “Snake Eyes,” *LA Times*, 14 Oct. 2001.

novel, though, she chooses not to create a dual focus on fundamentalisms but to explore the mysteries of faith, to find reasons why her characters might choose to follow as corrupt and hypocritical a religious leader as Sam Jenkins. In this she neither stretches too far in matching fundamentalism for fundamentalism, nor strains to import one location's mores into another's. Rather, Nahai shows that faith, fear, and desire defy logic and transcend place.<sup>36</sup> Blue, for example, lets others assume that in sharing the handling of serpents, she also shares Holiness beliefs, although, "I don't believe in Jesus and never did; don't believe in Holiness either. I was here only to fight the snakes" (203). Despite this, what she finds is a community and the supportive friendship of elderly Ann Pelton, who is non-judgmental, gentle, and practical, qualities not usually considered those that fundamentalist Holiness believers typically exhibit (221).

Although she has said it was "a new magical world that I was exploring," Nahai allows that it is a place that "belongs as much to the imagination as to the physical world just as the stories in Iran, all those ghettos, the Jewish ghettos in Iran and the palaces and the lives of those people, had this feeling of being fantastical and almost unreal for me."<sup>37</sup> Nahai imagines the South as she imagines Iran after almost twenty-five years away. And she emphasizes that her characters, most notably the otherwise unnamed "Professor," are as likely to imagine themselves into new identities as to remain locked into a cultural, religious, or ethnic self. The key motif that operates in this fashion is the "passing" plot, a narrative in which an individual hides his/her originary identity in order to assimilate to a racial and/or social norm. The theme of passing has traditionally been evoked in racial terms, as black-to-white passing in order to traverse the boundaries that have historically marked out racial inequality.<sup>38</sup> In *Sunday's Silence* stigma remains the key motive for ethnic and religious "passing." Blue's husband, the Professor, is the most

<sup>36</sup> In Nahid Rachlin's novel *Foreigner* (1978), for example, an Iranian woman marries a white American. When they first meet, he is excited by the image of Iran: "It used to be called Persia. I liked that name better. It fits with my image of the place ... Gardens springing up in the midst of deserts, magic carpets, caravans jingling in the night, and dark-eyed girls behind veils." His future wife tells him the image he has is close enough. *Foreigner: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 141. See also Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994) for cinematic examples.

<sup>37</sup> Liane Hansen, Interview with Gina Nahai on NPR, 6 Jan. 2002.

<sup>38</sup> But passing has seen a recent revival as a literary theme not only in its racial guise but in ethnic and religious terms too, in novels as different as Emily Prager's *Fire's Tattoo* (1993), Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2002). In *Sunday's Silence* Nahai also twists the classic passing narrative in new directions.



accomplished “passer,” an expert in camouflage; he is a professor of passing. He is both an Arab and a Jew who passes as a lapsed Muslim in France and as a Christian Baptist in the American South. Born into a family of Jewish merchants in Basra, from his early childhood he feels misplaced, as if “he wasn’t meant to be where his birth had placed him . . . he wasn’t meant to interact with and belong to the people who were his family” (264). Much of this feeling stems from his holding Jews in low regard and from a sense of his own scholarly superiority in a mercantile context; his rejection of his familial ethnic identity is part of his class consciousness. His escape is a double-bluff: when he departs for France in his eighteenth year, he bribes the passport office in Baghdad to give him a new name, a profession – “Professor” – and religion, Islam. That he first passes for a Professor but later becomes one in America is an act of self-fulfilling prophecy. But the Professor is also a serial passer who reinvents himself on two further occasions before returning to the Jewish faith in the last months of his life.

Nahai details the ways in which passing leads the Professor into a twisted, counterfeit life in the West. It is in Paris during the rise of Nazism when the ethnic “stigma” he has buried pulses in panic to the surface. He first loses himself in his doctoral studies, and then marries his psychology professor at the Sorbonne. She is a eugenicist whose outspoken beliefs about the superiority of the Aryan race catch the Professor’s story up in a supremely ironic twist. His wife is a Jungian psychologist who believes in a master race, a view with which her husband comes to concur for a while, without considering himself anything other than a rootless figure without race or ethnicity. As the Nazis come to power, he realizes he is a Jew married to a Hitler sympathizer who has become “part of the machine that destroyed Jews and Gypsies and Poles” (272). In Nazi-occupied France the Professor stays off the streets, living in fear of being recognized by another Iraqi Jew who may have escaped to Paris. Ironically for an academic whose expertise is ethnicity, his wife fails to “see” him or his ethnicity in their three children yet he fears his blonde blue-eyed daughters may still bear some “hidden trace to his true origins” and “betray him one day through their bodies or the workings of their minds” (273). After the war, he abandons his family without a word and heads for the US South.

The Professor of “mysterious origin” appears in Knoxville, his belief in the American Dream of self-reinvention a default position: “Europe had betrayed him. He banked his hopes on America” (277). Nahai leaves the exact form of his passing ambiguous; he may be passing as French or Arab descent or as an Arab formerly living in France. However, the Professor’s method of assimilating to the Protestant South is to trade on the local

ambivalence he has mastered. He passes as a Baptist, joining the Knoxville First Baptist Church as soon as he arrives, because in America “no one trusts a person who does not belong to a church” (187).<sup>39</sup> He arrives in America shortly after the Second World War when anti-Semitism was shot through with sorrow and guilt following the Holocaust. Nevertheless, in the 1940s and 1950s even Hollywood moguls still sometimes chose to repress their Jewishness; Jewish cultural centers in small southern towns were in decline in the 1950s, and Jews who sought more traditional observance moved away to join more robust communities in cities like Memphis.<sup>40</sup> In 1951 the forty-five-year-old Professor uses Blue to pass as Muslim once again in order to assure himself of a new (and safer) bride from the Middle East. He marries Blue but when he confirms his Muslim religion by signing the marriage contract, Blue senses that “he was hiding more than he revealed” (183). Only days later he forces Blue to pass as Christian in order to enter America as his child-bride, believing her “light features would fit in easily with the Americans” and that she will seem “Aryan” (177). He makes up his young wife’s face and dresses her in clothes that he hopes will bear out her new age of nineteen on the false documents that also forge her Christianity. This is Nahai’s ironic twist on the Professor’s experiences on leaving Basra for Nazi-occupied Paris.

In the aftermath of the attacks on New York’s World Trade Center in September 2001, which took place when *Sunday’s Silence* was in press, it is ironic that the Professor should feel safely invisible as a Jew passing as a Muslim passing as a Christian. However, as Melani McAlister pointed out in her study of American and Middle Eastern encounters published at precisely the same moment, between 1945 and 2000 representations of the Middle East were often “far more mobile, flexible, and rich than the Orientalism binary would allow.”<sup>41</sup> The transnational immigrant experience is one facet of this flexibility and *Sunday’s Silence* is something of a maverick fiction;

<sup>39</sup> The Professor’s words echo those of Dwight Eisenhower, who was not a member of any denomination but who during his presidential campaign of 1952 confided in southern evangelist Billy Graham that “I don’t believe the American people are going to follow anybody who’s not a member of a church.” In the event he only became a Presbyterian after becoming President. See Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; second edition), 88.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history and movement of Jewish immigrants to the South see, for example, Lee Shai Weissbach, “East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South,” *American Jewish History*, special issue on “Directions in Southern Jewish History,” 9, 1 (1997), 231–262; and see the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience at <http://www.msje.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 270.

despite the sections that tell the characters' histories, Nahai's transcultural imaginary has little of the social document about it. The 1973 US nuclear alert, as a result of conflict between Arab states, and the ensuing oil crisis as it affected US–Middle Eastern relations, or the rise of evangelicalism and fundamentalism in 1970s America, and the economic downturn, are taken as read.<sup>42</sup> This is largely because the affair between Adam and Blue and the Professor's clandestine regrets dominate and organize the mystery of how and why Sam Jenkins was murdered. However, in my reading, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) also informs the Professor's shifting cultural and religious identity; he chooses to make himself inauthentically Jewish, having felt that way from childhood. In this he acts as a brake on multiculturalist celebrations of difference by refusing to accept the performance of his ethnicity as inevitable. Following Sartre, in World War II Paris, he believes that the Jew is a Jew because other people recognize him to be, as if – authentic or not – there is an essence that the Nazis sought to eradicate, giving the lie to celebratory theories of the migrant's self-invention. In effect, the Professor is one of David Roediger's "not-yet-white ethnics" who succeeds in gaining an in-between space by "deflecting debate from nativity, a hopeless issue, to race, an ambiguous one."<sup>43</sup> The Professor erases his natal Jewishness but maintains an indeterminate Middle Eastern identity, borrowing religious identity as if in the essential closeness between Muslim and Jew – and Christian – he has found the loophole through which he may pass. He undertakes a series of mercurial performances or ontological aberrations, stepping in and out of identities. It is in performing the inauthentic – non-practicing – religious subject in these guises that he finds his way back to the authentic "secret" identity that he believed buried in his grandmother's garden in Basra. His Jewishness seeped under his fingernails as he scooped the dark soil until finally as an old man it re-emerges in the pores of his skin (300). The image is of a Jewish "stain" and is reminiscent of supposedly telltale evidence of black racial identity in the bluish half-moon of fingernails or a bluish tinge in the skin, all racial "signs" prevalent in southern literature. Most significantly, then, it is in the South that the Professor finally becomes "authentic," in order to die, if not live, as a Jew. Having existed in a liminal zone between black and white, a foreigner in the South who sustains his quiet life through academia and a home in suburbia, the Professor covers his crisis of faith in the same cautious way. In the

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, 165–78, for a detailed overview of the period.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (New York: Schocken, 1995); David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1994), 190.

Knoxville synagogue and *shuls*, he lets it be known that he is a student of Judaism until a Rabbi recognizes him for what he is, “a haunted man who runs from his own shadow,” and lends him the courage to face down his demons. The “mess of pottage” with which the Professor is left toward the close of the novel is transformed into the poison he takes to end his life.

Self-fashioning is, of course, a typically “American” immigration story of successful assimilation but Nahai shows that the Professor’s “passing” plot finally fails to render him invisible or unremarkable; his outsider knowledge is discredited and he remains a social pariah of sorts, albeit in a quiet way. The analogy he makes in his research between dead and dying languages such as the Aramaic of Blue’s childhood and the Holiness congregants’ “speaking in tongues,” for example, is rejected by colleagues at the University of Tennessee. They simply dismiss the linguistic experiments of a “creature” arrived “from Egypt, or Iraq, or another one of those places that never truly exist for the West” (197). Similarly, in marrying Blue, he has made himself visible in other ways. Although he sought a wife as a social safety valve, at the airport, officials see only a man married to a child and they smell perversion.<sup>44</sup> Nahai’s typically modernist “passing” plot is made more significant when Adam discovers the resolution to the mystery of his father’s death. Sam Jenkins was about to expose the Professor’s Jewishness and thereby disrupt the fragile home he has made in Knoxville. Exposing the Professor’s religious history will, Jenkins hopes, by extension, render the already-enigmatic Blue both Jewish and a fraud in the Church of Southern Hope and Redemption, an old man’s revenge for her spurning his sexual advances. Blue counters his poisonous plot by handing the preacher a lethal rattlesnake. The mystery can only be solved by coming to terms with the fear that lies behind the Professor’s marriage to Blue: the death of one man is signaled in the death of the other. The moment of death returns the novel to the desire on which all of Sam Jenkins’s relationships founder. In the end he is a victim of his own lust for a beautiful woman and his son’s love for the same woman overwhelms his desire for the “justice” that punishment might mete out. Adam finally acknowledges that the mistakes that his father and Blue’s husband have made can never be “resolved” and that they are as intricately linked in death as they were in hiding what they were in life.

<sup>44</sup> It is the only moment when the Professor’s successful religious passing is misread and although Nahai states that he seeks a wife, not a lover, this aspect of their relationship proves a weak point in the narrative. It may be an overextended effort to force correlations with one of the facets noted about the local poor whites: a propensity to marry young girls to much older men. Nahai Alumni Interview.

Nahai's description of the murder relies on the Holiness belief that the handler should be "anoointed" in the moment of taking up a snake – that is to say, a true believer pure in faith with his thoughts on God will come to no harm. The look that passes between Sam Jenkins and Blue reflects his fear and distrust but also Jenkins's residual lust for the beautiful believer who spurned him. In Jenkins's world view, if he is anoointed, the snakes will not harm him but lust catches him off balance more than once in *Sunday's Silence*, as when his stepdaughter Clare's clear-eyed gaze causes him to feel "anxious and distracted and so desperate to be near the child, he got bitten by every snake he picked up" (86). Sex is Jenkins's "lifelong temptation" that he surrenders to "with all the force and fury aroused in him by the snakes" (41); but he renders the girls and women he desires "ungodly" so that when Clare confronts him, pregnant with his son Adam, he preaches a lengthy sermon about Jezebels. When Blue will not be receptive to the old man's advances, he tells a bemused congregation she is the "Devil incarnate." His duplicity finally proves his downfall.

Sam Jenkins hopes to prove the Professor a "showman" in Erving Goffman's sense: "he who passes can find himself being called to a show-down by persons who have now learned of his secret and are about to confront him with his having been false."<sup>45</sup> However, Jenkins, too, is a performer, if not a "passer," whose role allows him to transcend the ordinary and thereby, as a poor man, attain agency and power amongst other poor men. He soon fails to live up to the code he preaches. He squanders his church's belief in the sanctity of the family, recommending that the children he fathers be brought up in orphanages, and his third wife attests that away from the Wesleyan precepts that the church espouses he "shed his faith like a bad fever" and was "an evil man with secret perversions" (92–93). The "Little" man who passes as a Holiness "Saint" for so long finally passes as a father in the throes of death, calling for his children who are strung out across Kentucky, Tennessee, and elsewhere to bury him. As a result of Jenkins's lack of paternal claim or care, Adam is a son who is not a son; he enjoys no contact with his father and even knowing he has siblings, still feels like a "true bastard seed" (215). Adam has scant experience of maternal love either. Clare, his mother, fulfills the role only once when she chooses her child over seduction by his headmaster and he rejects her when she returns to the orphanage to claim him as a sixteen-year-old. Feeling like an orphan and living like one, Adam becomes one even while his parents live.

<sup>45</sup> Erving Goffman, *Sigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990; first published 1963), 106.

The “passing” plot in Nahai’s novel has shifted in formulation. It continues to involve secrecy, most dramatically the will to survive ethnic cleansing and most typically to escape quotidian bigotry. However, while it is a form of impersonation, it is also the “elaboration” on a life story, in the way that Brooke Kroeger describes: “Like a passing note, it is sometimes a dissonant interjection against the prevailing harmony, but one with the purpose of smoothing a path of transition to a new and desired position or location.”<sup>46</sup> None of Nahai’s characters are unmarked by their choice to pass or to perform an identity, though her larger project in uncovering their ethnic pasts in long narrative digressions is to deepen the sense of a trans-cultural consciousness at the core of the novel. The local and the global are bound into the reader’s understanding of the love, faith, and guilt that motivates characters, even in the most secret corners of their lives. The “familiar” and the “strange” are made inextricable in comprehending individual characters, and the particular and the universal coincide in comprehending their roots, and their reasons for escaping them. The process of moving in and out of “other” or alien “worlds” is rarely subject to ethical judgment; protagonists are split personalities, fractured by guilt – or secretive due to responsibility they feel for others, as in Blue’s for her Professor husband even in the face of her attraction to Adam. Being oneself is shown to be a difficult risk to take, even inimical.

In *Sunday’s Silence* the ramifications of secret lives lived outside the South reverberate inside the region in violent and passionate explosions so that Appalachia becomes the place where “the knots of the narrative are tied and untied.”<sup>47</sup> The scene in which Adam and Blue first make love works in just this way. They make love in an underground chamber beneath the “Lost Sea” in Sweetwater, Tennessee, a huge underwater lake that is part of a cavern system. It recalls the Sea of Marmora from whose blue waters Blue derives her “American” name. For Adam their lovemaking is as secret and disorienting as driving blind across narrow mountain passes in the Middle East, “halfway between ecstasy and annihilation” (147). Their love affair is represented as an act of faith in the face of danger; in becoming her alibi for the time that the Professor was killed, Adam believes her story of his suicide. In this way, the “love plot” and the “passing plot” coincide. Guilt coils around the Professor, like the snakes tormenting Blue’s mother for having

<sup>46</sup> Brooke Kroeger, *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 210.

<sup>47</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” in M. Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258, 250.

abandoned family and faith. He has found no way of belonging since abandoning his family in Basra, his wife and daughters in Paris, and his young wife to Adam. The Professor's sense of displacement recalls that of Adam's mother Clare who, because she is "not like anyone who should have been born in these parts," finally drowns herself (220). Most particularly, of course, he is stifled by the same all-encompassing post-Holocaust guilt that causes his Nazi-sympathizing wife to hang herself. The Professor chooses poison over atonement because atonement is impossible.

For Adam, believing Blue's stories is "like making love to her, like holding a snake in prayer knowing it may kill or set one free" (298). Blue is haunted by fear that she will follow in her mother's madness. The serpents that plague Blue's mother's mind are the powerful but imagined symbols of her exile and alienation among her husband's people. Her mother's response is visceral:

Once, trying to throw off a snake that had dug its teeth into her, she threw herself into an open fire and burned her right leg. Another time she took a knife and cut her arm down to the bone, extracting, she said, the snake's poison. (167)

The snakes that provoke fear are already as familiar to Blue as her mother and the exorcism of the phantom involves locating its effects within the social realm. Far away from Kurdistan, the snakes Blue fights in the Holiness Church represent her mother's madness come to life, her own and her mother's fears "captured and placed in a box" (199).<sup>46</sup> In Nahai's novel, the snakes are carefully extricated from the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and from the fundamentalist image of Appalachian snake-handling churches; in the Middle East the snakes are synonymous neither with biblical symbolism nor with any particular faith but they are a crucial part of Blue's family history and the "baggage" she brings to the South, whatever her disguise. They are also a potent signifier linking her and Adam because serpents are his family inheritance and for each they are imbued with the guilt of abandoning home. The archetypal immigrant's dilemma and the archetypal southern expatriate's tale of love and hatred for home are brought together in Blue and Adam.

Ancestral and familial place – homeplace, to use southern vernacular – is made unstable in *Sunday's Silence*. This is made especially apparent via the self-reflexivity of individual testimony, the bluffs and double-bluffs in Blue's story, and the suppressed memories in Adam's – as well as the lies that constitute the Professor's personal history. While "Little" Sam Jenkins

<sup>46</sup> In this regard, see Nicholas Abrahams' explication of exorcism in "Notes on the Phantom," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1987), 287–92.

retains much of the stereotypical image of the southern snake-handling preacher, handling snakes is one of a series of cultural flows, so that by the novel's close it is no longer solely the province of poor white locals but part of a wider – global – folk culture and history.<sup>49</sup> The more Gothic elements of the text – kidnap, murder, suicide, snakebite and adultery – prove to mean more than melodrama because the drama arises organically out of the characters' specific backgrounds and histories. Faith, passion, violence, and fear texture Nahai's de- and reterritorialization and locate the complex cultural cartographies of the characters who contribute to this Appalachian story.

Nahai is not entirely successful in negotiating her way around the stereotypes that confound the southern Appalachian region, specifically those that accrue around womanizing, moonshining, snake-handling preachers. However, rather than simply becoming a literary tourist delivering a story that glibly mines such tropes,<sup>50</sup> the narrative swivels on the interdependence of difference and sameness – as played out in both the love and the passing plots. Blue and Adam are compared to two maps fitting together with home a “neverland” they find in each other (160). It is their relationship captured in its tense and startling sensuality that most energizes the transcultural turn of the novel.<sup>51</sup> How one separates out the local from the global is difficult to decide when each infiltrates the other so thoroughly. Place is, therefore, a metronome in the story that beats in time to Blue and Adam. While the novel takes in many locations, it is the switching between Kurdistan and Appalachia in Blue and Adam's past lives that confirms the transcultural fluidity to which the novel aspires. *Sunday's Silence* brings the Middle East into the American South and most particularly into the South's “Other.” In this way it opens up the local through characters whose dislocation from traditionally “southern” referents leads to an inventive reconsideration of cultural flows in this Iranian Jewish American writer's first foray into the American South.

<sup>49</sup> Dennis Covington, for example, refers to the serpent-handlers as “spiritual nomads ... refugees from a culture on the ropes,” in *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> To examine Appalachian writers writing back to such stereotypes, see Dwight D. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, eds., *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999). See also Linda Tate's overview of literature of the region, “Southern Appalachia,” in Richard Gray and Owen Robinson, eds., *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 130–147.

<sup>51</sup> This is also represented through the character of Isiah Frank, for whom life should be as grand as theatre and who is a little in love with both Adam and Blue for their extraordinariness.



