

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Odom is currently finishing his dissertation, “Southern Strategies: Narrative Negotiation in the Evangelical South,” which explores the narrative strategies southern writers employ to resist, satirize, and creatively negotiate evangelical communities. Evangelical religion has left an indelible mark on the southern literary tradition. A region Flannery O’Connor famously called “Christ haunted,” the South has produced writers who commonly employ religious metaphors to dramatize characters and events, regardless of their own religious views; as William Faulkner once remarked, Christianity is absorbed in every southern psyche by osmosis. Concerned with the interplay and tension between individuals and religious communities, Odom’s research examines writers—W.J. Cash, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Dennis Covington, and Doris Betts—who grew up in the South and eventually turned a critical and imaginative eye toward the region’s evangelical orientation. Through genres varying from memoir, journalism, novel, to short story, each author engages in “writing the self” within the context of religious community; such interplay produces fascinating narrative struggles with profound implications among topics such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. By understanding these writers as situated within their particular contexts, Odom traces how evangelical religion has marshaled cultural conformity in the South.

Odom’s research on religion and literature in the South has been published recently in notable journals. One article, “How to Win Friends and Convert People: Onnie Jay Holy and the Sales Culture of American Evangelicalism,” was awarded the 2012 Sarah Gordon Award and published in the Fall 2013 issue of the *Flannery O’Connor Review*. Drawing from historical, theological, and literary scholarship, Odom considers O’Connor’s use of religious satire within the framework of a postwar American culture of mass media and consumption. Comparing the sales tactics among popular self-help gurus and televangelists, Odom examines O’Connor’s unique characterization of the hybrid minister-salesman as emblematic of the influence sales culture has enacted upon American religion. In another article published in the Fall 2013 issue of *The Southern Literary Journal*, “Dennis Covington’s Salvation on Sand Mountain: Descent and Vision in the Southern Memoir,” Odom examines a journalist’s immersion into a Pentecostal snake handling church in Alabama, which poses provocative questions about how Americans conceive of religion, race, class, and politics in rural and urban areas. Odom recently completed a Digital Humanities appointment at the University of South Carolina Libraries consisting of bibliographic research, textual histories, meta-data entry, and curating nineteenth century American literary texts in digital format. The William Gilmore Simms Initiatives now comprises one of the largest single-author digital collections available online. Odom’s work in this emerging field resulted in two more publications in *The Simms Review* and the University of South Carolina Press.