I STUMBLED/I CAUSED YOU TO STUMBLE:

WHITE GIRLS AND QUEER YOUTH AS SEXUAL AGENTS IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL PURITY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren D. Sawyer

The aim of this project is to understand how young white women and white queer youth of all genders act as sexual and moral agents within purity culture while still being vulnerable to its harmful structures. I recognize contemporary purity culture, or the purity-focused sexual ethics espoused by conservative evangelicals and their institutions, as inherently white supremacist, a recapitulation of other purity cultures or movements within United States social history. Like other purity movements, contemporary evangelical purity culture positioned white children and adolescents as in need of patriarchal protection—most often protection from the racialized other. Rather than only recognizing how young people are victimized by purity culture, I argue that young people made choices that were both, and sometimes simultaneously, liberative and harmful to themselves and others.

To attend to this, I build on the work of queer, childist, and feminist scholars who invite us to a more expansive understanding of youth, not as un- or underdeveloped adults but full queer subjects and interdependent agents. Their choices frustrate the prevailing Western psychological and philosophical developmental theories that presume a certain trajectory of childhood from asexual to sexual, innocent to mature, deviant to normative. Affording youth epistemological privilege, I turn to the lived experiences of white girls and white queer youth as they grew up in purity culture (collected through

memoirs and personal narratives). I show how their choices do not always make adult sense, nor are they easily categorized as morally good or bad.

Critics of contemporary evangelical purity culture have raised important arguments against its inherent sexism, heterosexism, and its contribution to rape culture. However, much less has been written on the ways in which white youth are both harmed by and are active participates in purity culture as a mechanism of white supremacy. While I do not offer my own post-purity culture sexual ethic, I offer the concept of "orgasmic failure" as a starting point for understanding adolescent sexuality as part of the broader story of human sexuality.

DEDICATION

To my 15-year-old self: you had so much desire and passion for God, for writing, and for hot Christian boys. I hope I did well by you.

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One of the hardest parts about writing a dissertation in the midst of a global pandemic is how physically isolating it is. The first three years of my Ph.D. program were spent in the library or at the coffeeshop off-campus—among friends or at least strangers who were as focused on their laptops as I was on mine. Scholarship, I have learned, is best done in community. I have grieved the ways COVID-19 has taken that away from me; and yet, I am grateful for the ways that technology has made cross-country and quarantined writing possible. With that, I have many people to thank.

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The institutions that have supported me through my project include Drew University with its gems-of-humans, Meredith Hoxie Schol and Jesse Mann. (Jesse, what is there to say? Your encouragement via Reepicheep quotes have gotten me through so many difficult times.) The dissertation colloquy led by Liana Piehler has been the point of check-in I have so desperately needed every other week. I am grateful, too, for the opportunities Drew has provided me in participating in scholarly conversations, especially through my three years with the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

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I must also thank the means of "self-delusion"[1] that got me through this project, Goudy Old Style, the serif typeface that made first drafts look better than they actually were. I know many will see me as a traitor to Garamond, my life-long font choice, but Goudy, you know how to make italics look *so nice.* I am forever in debt. (I'm sorry you couldn't be a part of the final production.)

Finally, *finally*, the Spirit of God, the one who stirs and awakens desire—is this not an outpouring of whom you have called me to be?

[1] "[C]reative output of any kind depends upon a steady stream of tiny self-delusions—guardrails to keep yourself from veering into a pit of self-doubt and despair. Mind-set is blessedly malleable: We put on our best outfits not because we're going somewhere, but simply to look in the mirror and will ourselves to feel as good as we look. So I continue to 'select all' in my word documents and, for a moment, let myself believe that my words are as beautiful as the typeface in which they appear" (R.E. Hawley, "Write It In Garamond," Letter of Recommendation, *The New York Times*, February 1, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/magazine/garamond.html).

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: TRUE LOVE WAITS?

In May 2020, Stephanie Drury, a public critic of evangelical Christianity, tweeted a screenshot of a Facebook post with her added caption, "Ready to get your blood pressure up?" The original poster, a mom of twin teenage girls, shared about the "very special gift" her husband was giving their daughters for their fifteenth birthdays: three rings, each representing different aspects of the girls' sexual purity prior to marriage. The first kiss. The first I love you. The loss of their virginity. The girls' mother wrote,

> Each time the girls [Ariana and Ariah] reach one of those milestones[,] they must remove one of their rings and give it to the young man signifying that they understand that they are giving a piece of themselves away. The goal is that their husbands will have collected all three rings and can return them to them after their wedding night to be worn on their right ring finger.

The woman celebrates "the fact that both girls accepted these gifts and agreed to enter into covenant with us as we wait for the Lord to bring the men into their worlds that we have been praying for their entire lives."[1]

The original Facebook poster is steeped in what critics and scholars call purity culture, or "the constellation of beliefs, practices, and organizations that constitute the [conservative] sexual values of most evangelical subcultures in the United States."[2] The central injunction of purity culture is to refrain from all sexual behavior and eschew all

[1] Stephanie Drury—SCCL (@StuffCCLikes), Twitter Post, May 2, 2020, 9:20 AM, https://twitter.com/StuffCCLikes/status/1256619533017604096.

[2] Sara Moslener credits Donna Freitas for popularizing the term *purity culture* in her 2008 book, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 186 n7.

sexual desire until heterosexual marriage—a marriage reflecting the white American middle-class dream of two parents, "two children[,] and a dog."[3] For its advocates, maintaining purity is seen primarily as the responsibility of young white women, who are thought to not crave sex as men, or women of color, do. For while other racial groups in the U.S. promote purity in their churches, white evangelical purity culture is fundamentally a white construction of sexual purity that relies on a complex entanglement of race, gender, and economic structures/stereotypes. What is perhaps most unique about white evangelical purity culture—as opposed to, say, conservative sexual ethics espoused by some Muslim and Jewish parents in the U.S. or by those with traditional family values in India or Korea—is the expansive material culture it has produced: popular songs about abstaining from sex, novels featuring chaste young lovers, and purity rings.

Drury's Twitter followers, many of whom are ex-evangelicals or "exvangelials,"[4] expressed outrage at the mother's Facebook post, sending "gross" or "disgusting" in response or expressing disapproval in gifs, memes, and vomiting emojis.[5] Some

[3] Thelathia "Nikki" Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, & Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

[4] Prominent exvangelical writer and host of the podcast *#Exvangelical*, Blake Chastain, briefly defines *exvangelical* on his blog: "Similar to the way we use terms like 'ex-husband' or 'ex-girlfriend' to acknowledge a prior relationship that has ended, 'exvangelical' acknowledges an individual's prior place within the evangelical movement and culture that they have since left behind. 'Exvangelical' is an easily accessible shorthand to acknowledge our past experience. It nods to our heritage and how it has shaped us, but does not make any assumptions about what we—individually or collectively—believe now" (Blake Chastain, "'Exvangelical'—A Working Definition," *#Exvangelical*, March 2, 2019, https://exvangelicalpodcast.com/2019/03/02/exvangelical-a-working-definition).

[5] For example, Christopher Stephano (@cjstephanoAITC), Twitter Post, May 2, 2020, 9:46 AM, https://twitter.com/cjstephanoAITC/status/1256626216980930566. sheologian (@sheologian), Twitter Post, May 2, 2020, 9:23 AM, https://twitter.com/sheologian/status/1256620335304249345.

respondents darkly predicted abusive marriages for Ariana's and Ariah's futures.[6] One poster, @AlsoNamedSara, wrote what the other reactions seemed to be implying: "I'm guessing these girls didn't actually 'agree to enter this covenant' as much as they were forced and manipulated into accepting this 'gift.'"[7] What these responses seem to miss are Ariana and Ariah themselves. How do we know what they truly desire? Their mom states that both girls accepted these gifts and agreed to enter into an agreement with their parents—can we believe that these girls chose this for themselves? That is, can we take them at their word? The respondents to Drury's post seem quick to say no. The girls must either be brainwashed or are lying about their commitment to purity. These exvangelical responses reflect much of the growing literature on purity culture, which view girls like Ariana and Ariah as helpless victims to their parents and their conservative churches. What if these girls' experiences were centered and we considered them moral and sexual agents in their own right?

When purity culture, or exvangelicals who argue against its messages, render young people vulnerable, they often do so at the expense of their agency.[8] A young woman is not empowered to make choices for herself, so she is given a ring from her dad that makes the decision for her. A queer teen is described as brainwashed and helpless by

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[6] For example, Janey the Small (@JaneyTheSmall), Twitter Post, May 2, 2020, 9:34 AM, https://twitter.com/JaneyTheSmall/status/1256623141129818114.

[7] Sara Naps (@AlsoNamedSara), Twitter Post, May 2, 2020, 3:20 PM, https://twitter.com/AlsoNamedSara/status/1256710062975922180.

[8] See, for example, Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, "Introduction," in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church,* eds. Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal (Indianapolis: Epiphany Publishing, 2019), xxi-xxvi.

the exvangelical community for declaring their desire to remain celibate. In this dissertation, I turn my attention to the ways in which contemporary evangelical purity culture and its critics treat young white women and white queer youth as "moral children," as though they were unable to make moral and sexual choices for themselves, due to age, gender (for young women), and sexual identity (for queer youth).[9] Using a feminist social ethics framework, I argue that even in their vulnerability, these adolescents make choices about their sexual behavior in a system as racist, classist, and heterosexist (I argue) as purity culture, no matter how liberative or destructive those choices may be.

Thus in this project I ask, how have young white women and white queer youth understood themselves as agents of desire—as owners of and decision-makers for their bodies—within evangelicalism? How have they navigated their power of choice while being rendered vulnerable—as targets of abuse and exclusion? How have they found means of expressing creative and queer resistance against oppressive systems and authorities (be they their pastors, parents, or written texts) even in subtle and seemingly insignificant ways? And how might we understand these young people as participants in, and beneficiaries of, white supremacy even as they are vulnerable to its harmful structures? Indebted to the work of feminist, womanist, childist, and queer scholars, this project is concerned with how young white women and white queer youth develop sexual agency within conservative evangelical purity culture. I recognize the ways in which girls

[9] Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Mobile Sex? Teenage Sexting and Justice for Women," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 100, http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sce.2013.0036.

like Ariana and Ariah, are, indeed, vulnerable to abuse and manipulation, but that does not mean they are without any sexual agency.

This project makes a constructive moral claim about adolescent sexual agency by drawing on a diversity of scholarship. It joins the already-established conversation on the problems of purity culture but uniquely does so through the framework of feminist social ethics. Gary Dorrien defines social ethics as "a tradition that began with the distinctly modern idea that Christianity has a social-ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice."[10] Feminist, womanist, and childist social ethicists are particularly concerned with issues of gender, sex, race, and class inequality, as women and girls (especially women and girls of color) are disproportionately affected by social injustices. As a project of feminist Christian social ethics, with commitments to anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and queer inclusivity, I am concerned with both structural and interpersonal injustices imposed on white adolescent girls and queer youth by the white heterosexist patriarchy—namely, conservative American evangelicalism. My conversation partners span the disciplines, allowing me to adequately address the constraints of sexual agency within evangelicalism. I draw on sources such as sex-positive ethical resources; queer theory; social science research on adolescent development and behaviors; sociohistorical constructions of adolescence, sex, and whiteness within evangelicalism and the United States; the teachings and rhetoric of purity culture; anti-purity culture discourse; and the voices of young people themselves.

[10] Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1.

Feminist and childist ethicists have taken on this question of young people's moral agency, especially as children and youth are particularly vulnerable due to their age, gender, and developing sexuality. In an essay on teenage sexting, feminist Karen Peterson-Iyer, directly addresses what she understands as the problem of moral agency within purity culture: that its ideology treats young women as "moral children," rather than equipping them with the tools to make decisions about their own sexuality.[11] Queer feminist Marvin Ellison as well argues that such purity teaching ultimately "silence[s]" and "stigmatize[s]" sexually active youth rather than giving them the resources to create justice-oriented sexual ethics for themselves.[12] Childist ethics,[13] approached in the work of Kate Ott, John Wall, and Cristina L. H. Traina, addresses the moral agency of children and youth by considering their experiences as representative of human experience. By centering the lives of children, Wall provides frameworks for understanding the expansive nature of moral agency, particularly that it is fundamentally a part of being human; a young person's autonomy and capacity to reason grows over time. Traina draws on womanist scholars and legal theorists to suggest that moral agency preserves the dignity of those who have been oppressed by systems like the white supremacist patriarchy, rather than oppressing those folks further by suggesting they had no choice but to comply. In the same way, a child who has been groomed for sexual abuse may

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[11] Peterson-Iyer, 100.

[12] Marvin Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 121.

[13] Childist ethics is school of thought that provides theoretical grounding for understanding children and youth as moral agents. John Wall writes that "[c]hildism offers the needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism across research and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations" (John Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism: Reconstructing the Scholarly and Social Imaginations," *Children's Geographies* [2019]: 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912).

choose to participate in that abuse, but that does not mean she desires harm nor that she is culpable for it.[14] We should not understand these choices as passive compliance but as means for survival. What is missing from this scholarship, however, is how sexual and moral agency are limited for a young person steeped in purity culture, due to their gender or growing sexual identity. What are the unique challenges that purity culture creates for feminist and childist ethicists who insist on young people's agency?

Womanist social ethicists Katie Cannon and Emilie Townes, and Black feminist social ethicists Traci C. West and Thelathia "Nikki" Young, provide further complexity to conversations around agency, sexuality, and violation within oppressive systems akin, but not equivalent, to purity culture.[15] For example, Cannon and West write of Black women's creative resilience and defiance under slavery, Jim Crow, and within abusive sexual relationships. These scholars resist the complete victimization of Black women, though recognizing—as West does—that Black women and girls are not always offered the privilege of being believed as victims.[16] Rather, Black women ought to be understood as moral agents in their own right, able to navigate oppressive climates through creative means, though not always in ways that make sense to dominant white Christian values or moral systems. These womanist and Black feminist scholars' work deepens my

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[14] Cristina L. H. Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 20.

[15] See Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988. Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995). Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2006). Traci C. West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

[16] West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 5.

understanding of the impact of race/racial oppression and white supremacy related to moral decision-making and sexuality. They also help me address the dearth of scholarship that specifically confronts the role of racial identity formation in its intersection with adolescent sexual development.

THE MORAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF EVANGELICALISM

Scholars date the birth of purity culture as July 1994 when 25,000 conservative evangelical teens and young adults declared their commitment to sexual purity by gathering in the nation's capital and thrusting signed abstinence pledges into the lawn by the Washington Monument. "I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this date until the day I enter a Biblical marriage relationship," the pledge cards read.[17] Between 1994 and the mid-2010s, thousands of white evangelical teenagers and young adults in the U.S. would participate in purity culture by gathering at rallies, signing abstinence pledges, and wearing purity rings.

True Love Waits, the Southern Baptist organizer of the Washington event, saw this new purity movement as countercultural, an antidote to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Teens were encouraged to talk about their commitment to purity in the language of empowerment and as a form of "coming out" (as a virgin), warping the language of women's and gay liberation. In suggesting a contested relationship with liberation movements, these evangelical leaders saw sexual purity as "transformative—even

[17] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 91. See also Moslener, 109, and Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018), 25.

prophetic, to use theological language—in that it is a sexual orientation that witnesses to a new way of being that has the ability to transform the world."[18] Indeed transformative, organizations like True Love Waits and the Silver Ring Thing also joined forces with the federal government to provide abstinence-only-until-marriage education in public schools.[19] Such education still thrives in certain states that have chosen to tap into governmental resources.[20] However, purity culture as described by scholars Sara Moslener, Heather Hendershot, and others has certainly lost its cultural force since its heyday in the '90s and '00s, perhaps due to the growing scholarship on how psychologically damaging its teachings are especially to young women.[21]

In the past 15 years, and especially the last five, popular writers and documentarians have published works noting the expansive harm that purity culture has wreaked on exvangelical Millennials. Books like Addie Zierman's *When We Were On Fire,* Dianna E. Anderson's *Damaged Goods,* and Linda Kay Klein's *Pure* tell stories of young women who grew up within evangelicalism and internalized its messages of sexual and moral purity until marriage.[22] Therapists Tina Schermer Sellers and Matthias Roberts

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[18] Moslener, 119.

[19] Moslener, 113-118.

[20] Moslener, 117. See also John S. Santelli, Leslie M. Kantor, Stephanie A. Grilo, Ilene S. Speizer, Laura D. Lindberg, Jennifer Heitel, Amy T. Schalet, et al., "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact," *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 61 (2017): 275.

[21] Klein, 26. See Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[22] Addie Zierman, *When We Were On Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love and Starting Over* (New York: Convergent Books, 2013). Dianne E. Anderson, *Damaged Goods: New Perspectives on Christian Purity* (New York: Jericho Books, 2015).

See also Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased: A Memoir* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016). Jamie Lee Finch, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (Self-

have traced how those experiences extend beyond adolescence and into adulthood: purity-culture-induced shame can cause sexual dysfunction and relational complexes.[23] Documentaries like *Give Me Sex Jesus* and *Pray Away* have documented the harmful effects of purity culture on young people and queer youth, respectively.[24] More recently, purity culture has been taken up by scholars of religion, perhaps most notably by Donna Freitas who coined the term "purity culture" in her 2008 text on faith and the sex lives of college students.[25] Since then, scholars of religion such as Amy DeRogatis and Moslener have critiqued the inherent white supremacy, classism, and heterosexism of this culture through its historical trajectory (Moslener) and rhetoric (DeRogatis).[26] What is often missing from this scholarship is a focus on young people's moral and sexual agency, particularly how young white women and queer youth have participated in the harmful

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Published, 2019). Kevin Miguel Garcia, *Bad Theology Kills* (Self-Published, 2020). Steven Porter, "The Harm of Keeping Silent: Secret Romance on an Evangelical Campus" in *Kissing in the Chapel, Praying in the Frat House: Wrestling with Faith and College*, ed. Adam J. Copeland (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 77-86.

[23] Sellers. Matthias Roberts, *Beyond Shame: Creating a Healthy Sex Life on Your Own Terms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020).

[24] Matt Barber and Brittany Machado, *Give Me Sex Jesus* (2015), Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/137784146. Kristine Stolakis, *Pray Away* (2021; Blumhouse Productions, 2021), Netflix. See also Sarah Galo, "Give Me Sex Jesus: Young Evangelicals' Struggles with Sex and Church Teaching," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2015, accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/sep/17/give-me-sex-jesus-film-young-evangelicals-purity-culture.

[25] Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*.

[26] Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Elizabeth Gish, "'Are You a "Trashable" Styrofoam Cup?' Harm and Damage Rhetoric in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018), 5-22, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.2.03. Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010).

system and are not just victims to it. This project meets this need by providing a more nuanced portrait of young people's choices.

While purity culture crossed borders into secular culture through sex education and media,[27] it is primarily a product of white American evangelicalism. American evangelicalism can be defined multiple ways: theologically, historically, or socially. When defined theologically, scholars often draw on David Bebbington's quadrilateral, which describes evangelicals in the U.S. and abroad as those believe in the importance of evangelism, personal conversion, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the saving power of the Cross. Religion scholar Randall Balmer adds an important fifth descriptor central to American evangelicalism: personal piety.[28] Historically, evangelicalism is a branch of American Protestantism that was "broadly orthodox and active in social and missionary outreach,"[29] with its roots in the Second Great Awakening (1790s-1840s) and its subsequent reform movements. Undergoing shifts throughout the next century, evangelicalism reemerged in the 1940s as neo-fundamentalism, a politically and socially conservative form of Protestantism that clung to the fundamentals of the faith (akin to

[27] Famously, '00s popstar Jessica Simpson vowed to remain abstinent until marriage, a topic she was frequently asked about in interviews. Jessica Simpson, "Eyeshadow Abs," *Open Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020). Kindle.

[28] Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiv.

[29] Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

Bebbington's quadrilateral)[30] while attempting to engage broader culture through mass media, popular culture, and politics.[31]

Others have called evangelicalism a subculture of U.S. Protestantism with its own common language and material goods, like, as Barbara Wheeler writes: "thousands of Christian recordings, even more books . . . magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, leaflets, plaques, posters, greeting and note cards, bumper stickers, ceramics, jewelry."[32] Like Justice Stewart's infamous statement on pornography, many scholars and publics say that they know evangelicalism when they see it.[33] Thus, *evangelical* has come to describe people from a variety of different denominational affiliations, even those from non-Protestant traditions like Catholicism who consume similar products and espouse similar values.[34]

In this dissertation, I draw on the work of historians and scholars of religion who give context for the contemporary evangelical purity movement as a recapitulation of historical purity movements that regulated sexual desire. These movements were often

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[30] The fundamentals are belief in a virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Jesus' bodily resurrection, the inerrancy of Scripture, and premillennial dispensationalism (Bendroth, 3-4).

[31] Bendroth, 5; Angela M. Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14. See also Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[32] Barbara G. Wheeler, "You Who Were Far Off: Religious Divisions and the Role of Religious Research," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 4 (June 1996): 292, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3512010.

[33] Wheeler makes this argument as well, regarding the material culture of evangelicalism. She writes, "As various as they are, and as much as they have in common with the rest of American mass material culture, most evangelical artifacts are self-evidently evangelical" (Wheeler, 292).

[34] See, for instance, Lahr, 5; R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 2, 21.

led by white women and placed the burden of responsibility on white youth as the saviors of the Christian nation.[35] DeRogatis, Moslener, and R. Marie Griffith provide this historical frame by analyzing evangelical purity texts and/or the experiences of evangelical women from a feminist historical perspective, that is, by using gender as an analytical tool for understanding the past as it converges with the present.[36] These authors look at issues of power and agency within evangelical circles, especially the ways in which women find their voice within oppressive structures. Griffith, in her study of the multiracial evangelical women's ministry Aglow, shows that despite many conservative women submitting to their husbands in patriarchal familial structures, they found ways to creatively interpret their submission as a form of liberation.[37] Griffith challenges the liberal feminist desire to victimize non- or anti-feminist women as "brainwashed" or "simply repugnant"; she encounters her interlocuters as complex subjects who make choices that may be liberating, oppressive, or something in between.[38]

Feminist historians such as Gail Bederman, Kathleen M. Brown, and others have aptly pointed out that in the U.S. context, gender and race are inextricably linked.[39] This

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[35] See Griffith, *God's Daughters*; Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015). R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

[36] See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.

[37] Griffith, *God's Daughters,* 179.

[38] Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 204.

[39] See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Gail Bederman. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Sally L. Kitch, *The Specter of Sex: Gendered Foundations of Racial Formation in the United States* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

is no less true for evangelicalism where the language of purity and family values have long been dog whistles for white supremacist ideas.[40] Purity in the U.S. has always suggested racial purity, whether realized through miscegenation laws or the extralegal killing of Black men for allegedly raping white women.[41] As well, non-white people, especially Latina women and Black people of all genders, have been oversexualized and thus believed to be incapable of sexual purity.[42] White girls, instead, have been viewed as the paragon of purity, especially since the antebellum period, where white girls like Eva St. Clare of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were pitted against her companion, Topsy, a Black slave girl.[43]

Historians Seth Dowland, Peter Goodwin Heltzel, and Edward J. Blum have unambiguously named evangelicalism in the United States as a mechanism of white supremacy.[44] Early shapers of evangelicalism, like Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and preacher Dwight Moody, intentionally upheld racial

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[40] See Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Stacie Taranto, *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[41] See James H. Cone, "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See," *The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 1-29. Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1949).

[42] See Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious, Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[43] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[44] Seth Dowland, "The Politics of Whiteness," *The Christian Century* (July 2018). Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

stereotypes and enforced segregation in their organizations and revivals.[45] Tranby and Hartman challenge the theory popularized by sociologists Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, that evangelicals struggle to deal with issues of race due to their commitment to individualism (a "personal relationship to Jesus Christ," part of the Bebbington quadrilateral) and anti-structuralism.[46] This commitment has led evangelicals, through racial reconciliation organizations like Promise Keepers,[47] to view race as "a matter of the heart," not deeply embedded in the foundation of American evangelicalism.[48] Such a "color-blind" faith, argue Tranby and Hartmann, attempts to hide the ways in which the "taken-for-grantedness" of whiteness leads to stereotyping people of color for their failure to meet white standards (by pulling themselves out of poverty, for instance).[49] They write, "The hidden nature of white racial identity allows for a conflation of whiteness with existing social norms, values, structures, and institutions, in short, with the status quo."[50] White people's dominant stature in the U.S., and in evangelicalism in particular, provides them with the means to meet those norms and set the agenda for others who might not have the same economic and social resources.[51] For

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[45] Dowland, "The Politics of Whiteness," 27-28. Blum, "Inventor of Legends Miraculous," *Reforging the White Republic,* 120-145.

[46] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[47] Dowland, "Promise Keepers," *Family Values,* 207-227.

[48] Dowland, "The Politics of Whiteness," 30.

[49] Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problems': Extending Emerson and Smith's *Divided by Faith," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 347, 346, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20486928.

[50] Tranby and Hartmann, 347.

[51] Tranby and Hartmann, 347.

example, when Focus on the Family, the multi-million-dollar evangelical organization, promotes male headship and stay-at-home moms in two-parent homes as the "biblical" way to live, they exclude those whose access to such lifestyles are unachievable due to redlining and the race wage gap, while also problematizing multigenerational households.[52]

At the same time, the primary spokespeople for evangelicalism, including its authors, pastors, musicians, and celebrities are primarily white. As a result, the material culture evangelicalism churns out like those mentioned by Wheeler above, "presume[s] a predominately white readership . . . apparent through the choice of images, language, examples, and textual cues," writes DeRogatis.[53] Even while there are Black, Asian, and Latino/a evangelicals in the pews, [54] the messages from the pulpit and from its key figures suggest erasure and assimilation, not a celebration of difference nor a recognition of systemic racism.

As Black feminist scholars Young and West have shown, anti-Black racism and heterosexism are closely linked in the conservative Christian imagination. West articulates the ways in which queer-identifying Black people are particularly targeted because of their so-called deviant sex and race, while Young centers Black queer subjectivities in order to "destabilize," or queer, "normative norms" in the American

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[52] See Dowland, *Family Values*. Heltzel, "Focus on the Family," *Jesus and Justice,* 91-126. Moslener, *Virgin Nation.* Anneke Stasson, "The Politicization of Family Life: How Headship became Essential to Evangelical Identity in the Late Twentieth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2014): 1052-1151.

[53] DeRogatis, 127-128.

[54] According to the Pew Institute's Religious Landscape Study, 76% of adult evangelicals in the US are white, 6% Black, 11% Latino, and 5% other or mixed. "Racial and Ethnic Composition," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition.

family.[55] Purity culture prescribes "normative norms" by emphasizing the importance of heterosexual marriage, complete with "two children and a dog," as Young describes it.[56] We have already named the classist, racist, and sexist underbelly of evangelical purity culture, but a fourth concern of heterosexism is central to my work as well.

In this project, I use the term *queer* in two distinct ways. The first is as an umbrella term "used to describe sexual orientations or gender identities that may fall outside of heterosexuality and gendernormativity."[57] But *queer* can also function as a technical term, meaning as an adjective *non-normative,* and as a verb *to destabilize, disrupt,* or *skew.* Queer childhood studies scholar Hannah Dyer argues that all children are queer, as in, they do not follow the scripts adults set for them, in terms of how they perform gender, how they play, and grow up. Children often grow "sideways," developing and regressing in ways deemed atypical, at least next to the standard of "normal," meaning white middle-class boys.[58] Evangelicalism, in its prescriptions of purity culture, impose binary gender and sex norms onto youth, attempting to eliminate any queerness (homosexuality and non-normativity). Youth are expected to act a certain way based on their sex, toward the same trajectory of "biblical" marriage, again

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[55] West, "Defiant Solidarity," *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality*. Young, 193.

[56] Young, 5.

[57] Heather Corinna and Isabella Rotman, *Wait, What? A Comic Book Guide to Relationships, Bodies, and Growing Up* (Portland, OR: Limerence Press, 2019), 72.

[58] Hannah Dyer, *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020). Dyer borrows the language of "growing sideways" from Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). See also Kate Ott and Lauren D. Sawyer, "Sexual Practices and Relationships among Young People" in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality*, edited by Brian D. Earp, Clare Chambers, and Lori Watson, 258-270 (New York: Routledge, 2022).

described in pejorative racial and economic terms. Thus in purity culture, to be queer means erasure, for you cannot be both evangelical and queer at the same time.[59]

It is clear from above that evangelicalism is a harmful system for marginalized groups like people of color and queer folks. Even still, white kids—particularly white adolescent girls and queer youth—suffer under the system of evangelicalism. This is not to say they suffer more than or the same as Black girls or queer Asian youth, for example. White girls, both straight and queer, are privileged in that they will be one day ushered into white womanhood with all the privileges it grants; yet, they are vulnerable due to their gender within the context of purity culture. Queer white boys are privileged as white males yet vulnerable if they refuse to conform to gender and sex norms. Both groups are vulnerable as young people, due to their physical size and strength, cognitive development, and dependence on adults to meet their needs. And at the same time, both groups are complicit in white supremacy, as they use purity culture as a way to gain value in evangelical communities. The purpose of this dissertation is not to argue that white youth, gay or straight, are *more* vulnerable or *more* oppressed than other groups but recognize the unique way that even these two privileged, and complicit, classes are subjugated within purity culture.

In purity culture, white girls are perceived as innocent and asexual, yet also dangerous and deviant. Beginning from their conception, girls born into evangelicalism are considered vulnerable, the model of innocence for whom campaigns against abortion and child trafficking exist. They are thus vulnerable to outside forces as well, easily

[59] An exception to this is the Metropolitan Community Church, an evangelical denomination that was formed for the specific purpose of LGBTQ inclusion. Hendershot, "Holiness Codes and Holy Homosexuals: Interpreting Gay and Lesbian Christian Subculture," *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 114-144.

duped into having sex with men or buying into secular beauty standards.[60] Therefore, these girls must rely on their dads, pastors, or the state to protect them at all costs.[61] The stakes are particularly high when a girl reaches adolescence, where she is typically developmentally ready for sex. Yet, under purity culture, white girls are taught that they do not desire sex as men (or women of color) do. When a young white woman expresses her own sexual desires, by engaging in sexual behavior or wearing immodest clothing, she is thought to be even more dangerous, capable of bringing good men down with her. For it is adolescent girls' and women's responsibility to keep men from crossing a line sexually (premarital or extramarital sex, for example). Queer youth—those whose same-sex desires are growing and identities are solidifying—are viewed as either victims of preying gay adults or merely confused Christian boys and girls who can be "cured" through repentance and by submitting to binary gender norms.[62] Young lesbians/questioning girls receive the same messaging as their straight sisters. Young gay/questioning boys are taught that their sexual desires toward girls are nearly impossible to control, yet pornography and masturbation are sinful ways to curb their raging hormones.[63]

As we lay the foundation for contemporary evangelical purity culture as a product of white supremacy, imbued with (hetero)sexist and middle-class norms, we turn to

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[60] See for example Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2009).

[61] See Gish and Peterson-Iyer.

[62] Dowland, "Gay Rights," 158-180. See also Hendershot, 114-115.

[63] See, for example, Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, *Every Young Man's Battle* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2002). Or see the Focus on the Family young men's magazine, *Breakaway*.

particular methods of inquiry to contextualize and analyze young people's lived experiences within that culture. These methods will lead us to an expansive view of adolescent sexuality as the foundation for a post-purity culture sexual ethic that neither ignores white youth's vulnerability nor their complicity within purity culture.

METHOD

This is a wholly interdisciplinary project, drawing on multiple sources of inquiry. As Brent Smith defines it, "interdisciplinarity is not a particular method of conducting study, not a methodology but a way to perform a given methodology."[64] With commitments to feminist and childist ethics, my project centers young women and queer youth themselves as valuable conversation partners. For it is not only the authorities of white evangelicalism—the authors, speakers, musicians, pastors, parents—that shape purity culture. Young people—like Ariana and Ariah—do as well. My method takes an inductive approach by beginning with the experiences of white young women and white queer youth, then constellating other sources of knowledge (sociology, history, media, ethics, etc.) to analyze those experiences. I see the ethics, social science, and historical scholarship, alongside personal narratives, as creating a robust portrait of young people's sexual agency within this newly recognized oppressive system: contemporary evangelical purity culture.

My choice to privilege the lived experiences of marginalized youth is in line with my feminist commitments to reject the so-called "view from nowhere."[65] Feminist

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[64] Brent Smith, *Religious Studies and the Goal of Interdisciplinarity* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 25.

[65] Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum Books, 2011), 64.

scholars have argued that this view from nowhere is actually an androcentric positionality, as all perspectives are embodied.[66] Just as my relationship to my research has not been formed in a vacuum but is shaped by my embodied experience as a cisgender white woman, the same is true for the youth I am studying. My feminist commitments lead me to be self-reflexive of my own embodiment; I recognize that my experience within purity culture does not encompass all human experiences, not even all cisgender, female, white, heterosexual experiences. While this dissertation does not include autoethnography as a method, per se—that is, I do not "use [my] personal experiences as primary data"—I do recognize my particular relationship to the subject of this dissertation has a bearing on how it is written and the conclusions I make.[67] Who I am as an "embodied self-as-scholar" is, as Smith writes, "never far from the surface."[68]

Like the white girls and queer youth I study, I, too, spent my teenage years (2003-2008) invested in evangelical purity culture. I signed multiple abstinence pledges, prayed for my future husband every night, and sported an "I Love Christian Boys" t-shirt at the Pro-Life Music Festival every summer. I committed myself to being *the* good Christian girl, but I also found myself wholly bothered when I was scolded for wearing too short of shorts on a missions trip because the boys might get distracted. (The shorts were cute; Mississippi was hot.) These moments of frustration and confusion brought me to a breaking point when, at 18 years old, my best friend came out to me as bisexual. I could not reconcile the love I had for my friend with the messages I had internalized from my

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[66] Scharen and Vigen, 64.

[67] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Books, 2008), 48-49 as cited in Smith, 14.

[68] Smith, 13, 14.

church—a church that, eventually, asked my friend to leave. That fall, I went off to a predominately white evangelical liberal arts college and found myself among a small group of others who were questioning purity culture too. Some were, like me, fed up with the double-standards and wanted a version of Christianity that allowed women the freedom of voice and choice with our bodies. Others were queer, or suspected they might be, and knew well enough that they could not be gay and Christian—at least not gay and evangelical. My perspective as someone who was committed to the ideologies of contemporary evangelical purity culture, and who both experienced and witnessed the policing of sexuality, allows me to approach my topic not just as an outsider looking in but as someone who has deftness with the rhetoric and norms of evangelicalism and a personal stake in the work.

As a feminist committed to childism, I prioritize the subjectivity of young people, specifically adolescent girls and queer youth who grew up within purity culture, while avoiding sentimentalizing, demonizing, or overly generalizing their experiences. I echo the sentiments of feminists Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott who argue, "It is important … not to locate children and young people as cultural dopes, as passive recipients" of media, or in this case, purity culture rhetoric. "It is equally important in recognizing children's agency not to equate it with resistance. If we see girls as either 'brainwashed' by the media or as in rebellion against dominant discourses, we lose sight of the actualities of their everyday experiences and practices."[69] Affording youth epistemological privilege, I listen to their experiences to consider how they negotiated their agency within white

[69] Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "A Sociological History of Researching Childhood and Sexuality: Continuities and Discontinuities," in *Children, Sexuality, and Sexualization,* eds. Emma Renold, Jessica Ringros, and R. Danielle Egan (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 50.

evangelical purity culture, despite the limitations placed on them because of their gender, their (however hidden) sexual identities, or the privileges of their race. This does not assume that youth always make well-reasoned decisions, nor that they are inherently bad decisions—or good.[70]

In centering the subjectivities of adolescents, I consider narrative as one way of crystallizing personal experience. In this project, I rely on the multitude of already-published ethnography and personal essays written by white women and queer folks of all genders, looking back at their adolescence. This methodological choice frees me to probe these narratives for examples of moral and sexual agency, rather than replicating ethnographic work. Yet, relying on already-constructed narratives has its limitations. For one, stories are always written within specific "narrative environments . . . assembled and told to someone, somewhere, at some time, with a variety of consequences for those concerned."[71] The narratives analyzed in this project are written by adults reflecting on their adolescent experiences, for some many years later; these are not diary entries, nor are they attempting to address my specific research questions. The truths that I extract from these stories, therefore, may not reflect adolescent experience as much as they reflect the adult perspective interpreting the adolescent experience. I mitigate this issue by drawing on social science research that includes adolescent voices (e.g. Regnerus) and by using a broad set of sources that suggest a level of consistency among different people writing or responding to interviews in strikingly similar ways. I agree with Aana Marie

[70] See also Kate Ott, "Orgasmic Failure: A Praxis Ethic for Adolescent Sexuality," in *Theologies of Failure*, eds. Roberto Sirvent and Duncan B. Reyburn (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 107-118.

[71] Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, "Chapter 12: Narrative Ethnography," in *Handbook of Emerging Methods*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 247.

Vigen and Christian Scharen that narratives must be "triangulated" alongside other sources of knowledge, such as social science research and history, in order to provide the "thick description" necessary to make constructive moral claims.[72]

I draw on feminist scholars of religion like Griffith, Hendershot, and Moslener and queer historian Gabrielle Own to provide the historical and cultural context for how particular ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality are developed throughout time, space, and among certain populations. They are particularly privy to issues of gender and power and how whiteness has been constructed by race, gender, and class within in U.S. evangelicalism. Their work is supplemented by sociological data which tracks the changing sexual behaviors of young adults throughout recent U.S. history. Mark R. Regnerus in his book *Forbidden Fruit* has traced the effectiveness of abstinence pledges in preventing evangelical adolescents from engaging in premarital intercourse.[73] And Emma Renold et al. shows how present-day adolescents behave sexually, including how they understand themselves as sexual beings. This data provides an antithesis for the messaging of purity culture, which suggests that young women, in particular, do not seek sexual relationships but are passive recipients of boys' desires.

All this descriptive work (both personal experience and scholarship) provides grounding for my constructive argument, that despite the restrictive nature of purity culture—especially to young women who are thought to *not* have sexual desire and queer youth who have *deviant* sexual desire—adolescents find paths to negotiate and develop

[72] Scharen and Vigen, 62.

[73] See chapter 4 in Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83-118.

their own sense of sexual and moral agency within those strict boundaries. To argue this, I borrow language from ethicists like Traina, Ott, and Wall who understand moral agency as generative: not just belonging to adulthood or precluding vulnerability. These feminist and childist voices again challenge the sentimentalization or demonization of youth sexual experiences apparent in evangelical texts as well as in some social science and historical research. At the same time, I draw on the work of womanists and Black feminists who push me to consider the impact of race on constructions of sexuality. West and her study of defiance and resilience in Black victim-survivors of abuse helpfully offers language of agency and dignity through the practice of centering oppressed voices in a way that other ethics texts do not. Though her work is not directly applicable to the study of white youth, it is invaluable here as it addresses the impact of white supremacist ideologies on sex and sexuality.

Ultimately, this project draws on multiple disciplines and sources of knowledge that reflect my feminist commitments to centering the experiences of young women and queer youth, while also giving attention to issues white supremacy ideology inherent within evangelical purity culture. Together, these sources help me argue for a more inclusive and complex understanding of young people's sexual and moral agency within purity culture.

ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

This dissertation takes the following structure. The second chapter unpacks the historical trajectory of purity movements and cultures prior to the most recent purity culture of the 1990s and 2000s by looking specifically at how women and young people were perceived through these movements. I begin the chapter by looking at childhood

and adolescence as bourgeois Victorian constructions and how, then, the Child and Teen have been used as tools of particular political and religious agendas. By beginning at the reform movements spurred by the Second Great Awakening, this chapter traces the inherent white supremacy of the purity movements. Ultimately, this chapter creates the foundation for understanding contemporary white evangelical purity culture as a normative, and inherently oppressive, structure in which white youth must navigate.

Chapter 3 brings the recent past and present day into focus with a psychological, philosophical, and socioethical look at adolescent sexual development, agency, and ethics. This chapter challenges prevailing Western views of children and adolescents as unformed adults or morally inept—which are consistent within contemporary evangelical purity culture—or morally culpable and adult-like. Instead, through queer theory and childist ethics, I argue for an understanding of young people as interdependently autonomous and queer subjects. I develop "orgasmic failure" as a descriptive term for understanding adolescent sexuality, which recognizes young people's full personhood and agency.

Chapter 4 turns to the lived experiences of young people as valid sources of knowledge. The chapter begins with an unpacking of the usefulness of narrative as a method in Christian social ethics and its limitations before it retells then analyzes stories of young women and queer youth as they navigate particular norms of evangelical purity culture. As the heart of my project, this chapter locates moments of moral and sexual agency within young people's narratives and draws attention to how whiteness (though often made invisible), with its heteronormative and middle-class values, functions within

their gender and sexual development. This chapter reveals young people's inherent agency, even as they are vulnerable to the structure they are participating in.

Finally, chapter 5 locates my project within the broader frame of anti-purity culture discourse and within the field of Christian social ethics. I argue that in order to develop a post-purity culture sexual ethic, we must address purity culture as a product of the white supremacist patriarchy in the U.S. In that, we must recognize young white women and white queer youth as both complicit participants in, as well as vulnerable victim-survivors to, its teachings, materials, and norms. This project furthers the work of feminist ethics, locates childist ethics in an arena it has yet to enter (post-evangelicalism), and offers a novel perspective on how to understand white evangelical purity culture. At the end of the chapter, I return to "orgasmic failure" and "burdened virtues," both introduced in chapter 3, as ways of articulating the contours of adolescent sexuality and the particular "burdens" of white adolescence.

CONCLUSION

Reading Drury's tweet about Ariana and Ariah reminded of a few years back when I met my friends, Cassie and Jenny, for drinks and tapas at a San Francisco bar. It was January when we sat in the back room of The Tipsy Pig, sipping cocktails and hearing all about Cassie's new relationship with Andrew. Cassie was in her early 30's then and in her first adult relationship—her first *sexual* relationship, we knew this meant. All three of us had grown up going to predominately white conservative evangelical summer camps and churches and learned the common teachings of abstinence until marriage; that masturbation is a sin that only boys struggle with; and the importance of

modesty, meaning no spaghetti straps even in 100-degree heat lest we cause the boys to stumble. All three of us had since left that world behind.

Somehow the topic got to purity rings and how, after more than a decade, Cassie and Jenny still wore theirs. Cassie got her ring in college, after an idea came to her in prayer. She does not call hers a purity ring but a *needs and wants* ring, a way to remember that all of her needs and all of her wants are protected and surrounded by God, she said.[74] She wears the ring on the middle finger of her left hand, her own little form of rebellion, reminding herself and her Christian peers that she is more than her marital—or virginal—status. Jenny bought her ring in Ireland as a way to remind her then 20-something self never to make an important life decision based on a guy. Borrowing from her evangelical upbringing, Jenny held the boundary of no-sex-until-marriage in her dating life, but she found that the men she dated were always trying to change her mind on this, as early as the first or second date. All the debating and manipulating culminated in Jenny's sexual assault by a guy she met on a dating app. Now her ring reminds her that her desire matters; her pleasure matters; and her choices matter.[75]

Jenny and Cassie were not "forced" or "manipulated" into wearing their rings; rather, they actively translated the ring from a symbol of purity into something meaningful for them, as a needs and wants ring or a personal choices ring.[76] These, of course, happened within the bounds of a privileged white middle-class status, where they had the resources to enact their subjectivity in such a way.

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[74] Cassie Carroll, Zoom call with author, July 30, 2020.

[75] Jenny Wharram, Zoom call with author, July 30, 2020.

[76] From Sara Naps's (@AlsoNamedSara) Twitter post.

We might imagine, too, how 15-year-olds Ariana and Ariah might choose to wear their rings differently. Maybe the rings will represent their needs and wants and will never be given away. Maybe one or both of the girls are queer and their first loves are other girls or trans or non-binary folks who will receive the rings intended for cisgender young men. Or maybe they really do believe that abstinence from all sexual behavior before marriage is what is right for them, and they will wear their rings into their 20s or 30s. Even as their parents and religious community prescribe a certain meaning to each of those three rings, Ariana and Ariah may interpret them differently, just as Cassie and Jenny refused to call theirs purity rings. Young people, just by nature of being human, have the capacity for moral agency, even as the choices seem limited or imposed or prescribed by an authority as powerful as the white evangelical patriarchy.

CHAPTER TWO

PURITY PANIC: YOUNG PEOPLE'S "NATION-SAVING" ROLE IN U.S. SOCIAL HISTORY

On a 2019 episode of the popular podcast, *You're Wrong About,* hosts Sarah Marshall and Michael Hobbes—two Millennial reporters with a love for researching moral panics—discuss what adults have been "wrong about" with regard to teen sexting, the act of sending sexual texts or nude photos of oneself to another person, either consensually or coerced. Amy Hasinoff, author of *Sexting Panic,* joins Hobbes and Marshall as a guest expert, citing how common sexting is among teens and young adults—up to 70% participation, depending on how the survey questions are posed and who is being asked:

> HASINOFF: This is not like behavior that is just done by a couple weird people. Like, it's pretty common at this point.
> HOBBES: This is not deviant behavior. This is … normal behavior. And not sexting is, statistically speaking, the deviant choice.
> HASINOFF: Well, I don't know that it's, like, deviant. I mean, it is still risky, so—
> HOBBES: *[Laughs]* I just want to be on record as saying people who do not sext are deviant. I just wanted to be crystal clear.
> *[Laughter]*[1]

Hasinoff considers 2008 as the beginning of the sexting panic with the release of a provocative *CosmoGirl* article on the prevalence of sexting among teen girls; some baseless child pornography charges against adolescents in Pennsylvania; and a young

[1] Michael Hobbes and Sarah Marshall, hosts, "Sexting." *You're Wrong About* (podcast), June 11, 2019, accessed January 10, 2021, https://www.buzzsprout.com/1112270/3883976-sexting.

woman dying by suicide after her nude photos were spread around her school.[2] These three incidents fueled the public outcry: not only has sexting been construed to be legally and socially dangerous, so goes the argument, but "the consequences of sexting are [that] you will die."[3] The podcasters laugh at the absurdity of this.

There are many religious leaders, legislators, jurors, academics, feminists, parents, and media persona in the United States who do not find teenage sexting to be a laughing matter but one of dire concern, a dangerous activity that leads to the oversexualization of girls in U.S. culture, the rise in supply and demand of child pornography, and, as in the case of Jessica Logan, death by suicide.[4] Gender historian Steven Angelides uses the language of moral/sex panic for the concern surrounding sexting to "highlight how the politics of fear and emotion perform a number of social functions" often "beyond" their proposed goals to protect (most often) children from harm.[5] That is, what makes something like the sexting panic a sex or moral panic "is the level to which the societal and personal expressions are out of proportion with the threat posed" or are misdirected.[6] For example, while cyberbullying and harassment appear to be the real catalysts in Logan's suicide, "[t]he act of private, consensual sexting is rhetorically constructed to embody the risks of bullying, harassment, and psychic trauma,

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[2] Instances also cited in Steven Angelides, "Sexting," *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young People, Sex, and Agency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 157-177.

[3] Quote by Amy Hasinoff on Hobbes and Marshall, "Sexting."

[4] See Angelides, chapter 7.

[5] Angelides, xxiv.

[6] Gilbert Herdt cited in Angelides, xxiv. Angelides, 163.

and the overarching narrative in the media and educational campaigns becomes one of the *problem* and *danger* of sexting."[7]

Angelides, along with sociologists R. Danielle Egan, Gail Hawkes, Stevi Jackson, Sue Scott, and others, have argued that moral/sex panics centered on children (i.e., persons under 18),[8] like the sexting panic, are rarely about the youth themselves—nor their particular actions—but are a reflection of adult anxieties in an unstable society.[9] That is to say, moral panics around teenage sexting in the 2010s, or, say, "masturbation phobia" in the 1870s, obscured the larger social instabilities of economic depressions and recessions; increased urbanization; disquiet over growing non-white immigrant populations and Black integration and advancement; apprehension over new technologies; and waves of political unrest that have existed and continue to exist in the United States. "The need to protect children from sexuality acts as a smokescreen for other social interventions that often go far beyond the bodies and pleasures of children themselves," write Egan and Hawkes.[10] Under the guise of child protection, the subjectivities of children are ignored or erased and replaced by the figure of the innocent

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[7] Angelides, 164.

[8] Angelides writes of how in moral/sex panics, the differences between child and teen are "frequently downplayed, collapsed, or ignored within a unified and age-stratified legal category of the Child" (Angelides, xv). Thus, Child encapsulates all of those who fall below the legal age of consent, whether 5, 12, or 17 years of age.

[9] Angelides, xvii; R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2010); Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "A Sociological History of Researching Childhood and Sexuality: Continuities and Discontinuities," in *Children, Sexuality, and Sexualization*, eds. Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and R. Danielle Egan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 39-55.

[10] R. Danielle Egan and Gail L. Hawkes, "Imperiled and Perilous: Exploring the History of Childhood Sexuality," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 4 (2008): 365, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2008.00341.x.

Child.[11] This Child, configured in the United States[12] most consistently as white and economically stable, can *do* nothing for herself, but her likeness inspires protectionist agendas and incites fear of the other.

In this chapter, I use moral/sex panic as a framework to understand adolescent sexuality as a sociohistorical construct, especially among evangelical Christians in the United States, to set the stage for understanding adolescent agency within the 1990s/2000s evangelical purity movement. Drawing primarily on the work of feminist and queer social historians, I consider childhood and adolescence as inherently racial, gendered, and bourgeois constructs used to regulate sexual and moral behavior in U.S. society from the Victorian era (broadly the 1800s) through present day.

The chapter begins with an overview of childhood and adolescence as constructs dating back to the Enlightenment and late Victorian eras, respectively. The concepts of childhood and adolescence, from their origins, have been deployed in racist, sexist, and classist ways, especially in the United States, to reinforce links between ideas such as purity and femininity; innocence and whiteness; and respectability and the middle class. From there, we look more specifically at the figure of the Child or Teen in three moral/sex panics: the social purity movement of the turn-of-the-century; what I am calling the "family values movement" in the mid-20th century; and evangelical purity culture of the 1990s and 2000s. These panics were responded to in part by evangelicals, whose itch for moral reform can be traced as least as far back as to the Second Great

[11] I, Angelides, and others are indebted to the work of queer theorist Lee Edelman's Child as "the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 3).

[12] Elsewhere, too. Angelides and others write specifically of the Child in the Anglophone West—Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Awakening in the early 19th century.[13] Evangelicals have played a unique role in responding to these moral/sex panics, often as leaders in reform movements, to safeguard children and adolescents from immoral outside influences and to reassert children's and youth's role in furthering the kingdom of God. Indeed, both evangelical and secular moral authorities have positioned the white Teen as the bastion of hope for a fallen world because of their unique standing between childhood and adulthood. This chapter arranges the historical and social landscape for the expansiveness of adolescent moral subjectivity and agency, which we will consider more fully in chapter 3.

THE INNOCENT CHILD, THE DEVIANT ADOLESCENT, AND THE "NORMAL" ADULT

"The category of the child is notoriously unstable, the meaning of which shifts, expands, and contracts according to history, nation, culture, legal statute, context, and discourse," writes Steven Angelides in the introduction to his book, *The Fear of Child Sexuality.* In his text, Angelides primarily writes about adolescents yet uses the language of *child* and *children*. "Principally," he writes, "the reason for this is that the young people" he writes about "are defined as children by age-of-consent and sexual-offense laws (and also, in fact, by sex panic discourses)."[14] Gabrielle Owen, in her *Queer History of Adolescence,* writes that often adolescence is subsumed under the category of childhood; like Angelides's description, adolescence, too, is "not stable, not fixed in time,

[13] *Evangelical* is itself an unstable word with changing meanings for those inside and outside evangelicalism. See chapter 1 for my definition of *evangelical* relevant to this project.

[14] Angelides, xxvi-ii.

not objectively defined or even definable."[15] Beginning with the assumption of instability as posed by these authors, this section will trace the logic of childhood and adolescence through the 18th and 19th centuries.[16] I will show how categories of age—alongside other categories of difference like race, gender, and sex—were wielded by those in power to reify existing social hierarchies in the United States. This section begins briefly in the 4th century and arrives at the early 20th century, tracing views and constructions of child and adolescence, especially as racial and gendered concepts.

Childhood

When Augustine of Hippo (352-430 CE) wrote "so tiny a child, so great a sinner" about his boyhood misdeeds, the concept of childhood as a period of life wholly distinct from adulthood had not yet been conceived.[17] Let alone adolescence: the African priest wrote of his puberty years as tumultuous before those in their teens were distinctly characterized as "out of control, deviant, criminal."[18] Augustine had a recognizable influence on views of children and youth through Western ethics and philosophy—from Calvin to Kant and into the New World by the Puritans.[19] Religious ethicist John Wall

[15] Gabrielle Owen, *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developing Pasts, Relational Futures* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 8.

[16] I borrow the language of the "logic of adolescence" from Owen to encompass "a particular set of assumptions and beliefs about hierarchy, development, and age" that coincide with the development of these two categories of age (5).

[17] Augustine, *St. Augustine Confessions*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38. eBook.

[18] Owen, 147.

[19] John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 15-18. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 36.

John Calvin (1509-1564 CE) believed, like Augustine, that even babies were capable of sin, though they were not as "blameworthy" as older children and adults. He held that unbaptized babies were

summarizes the Augustinian view of childhood as a "top-down" model, where children are viewed as disordered from birth and need adults, God, or educators to reform them into good future adults, Christians, or citizens. The irony of this model, Wall writes, is that children are responsible for their bad behavior yet lack the agency to do anything about it on their own. Like the screaming infant described by Augustine in Book I of his *Confessions,* a child is to be reprimanded—for Augustine, by God—and steered in the right direction.[20]

"Children," wrote New England Puritan minister Cotton Mather in 1631, "this is your dawning time—it may be your dying time.—It is now upon computation found that more than half of the children of men die before they come to be seventeen years of age. And needs any more be said for your awakening to learn the Holy Scriptures." [21] Calvinist Puritans in the British colonies of North America (1600s CE) believed, like Augustine, that children were born with the capacity to be "criminal"—but also born with the capacity to be "rational," akin to being morally good. Social historians Egan and Hawkes summarize that in Puritanism, "[t]he child, however young, was handed the responsibility for its own salvation."[22] By the Enlightenment (1715-1789 CE), children

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hell-bound, but that did not make them "*more sinful* and depraved than anyone else." In fact, children were "a little less sinful" than adults "since they had not yet had opportunity to commit actual sin" (Barbara Pitkin, "'The Heritage of the Lord': Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Child in Christian Thought,* ed. Marcia J. Bunge [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001], 165-169).

See also Catherine A. Brekus, "Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing," in *The Child in Christian Thought,* ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 300-328.

[20] Augustine, *St. Augustine Confessions*, 29-46.

[21] Cited in Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity,* 17.

[22] Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity,* 17.

were seen as neither good nor evil but vulnerable to the influence of malevolent peers and adults.[23] Enlightenment thinkers believed children to be passive and vulnerable, like "camelions," as John Locke wrote. They became good or bad depending on the company they kept. Like the "top-down" model described by Wall, these children needed "an *external* guiding force to monitor and direct the balance between passion [i.e. pleasures] and reason." The Enlightenment was also the period when children were first viewed as a separate class of people, wholly distinct from adults.[24]

However, by the early 19th century in Western thought, the prevailing view of children as neither good nor evil, yet easily influenced, shifted again. By the birth of the social purity movement—a moral/sex panic described in more detail below—"Innocence . . . was assumed to be an inherent quality of childhood as well as a virtue that must be taught." At least, that was the case with white, bourgeois children. In the 19th century, white middle-class children were believed to be sensate—that is, they experience the world through their senses and are in turn affected by the sensory world. Children are ultimately, then, corruptible, especially when it came to sex. "Pure children were assumed to be de facto asexual," write Egan and Hawkes. "However, if sexual curiosity or worse still precocious activity was present in a formerly innocent child, its manifestation was the result of a deviant outside influence." Those influences were often other children—particularly older or poorer children. Working-class children and their families were believed to be immoral, "dirty, bawdy, and sexually suspect"—especially

[23] See also Bernstein, 37.

[24] Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity,* 17-18, 21, 34, 46.

for how the sexes intermixed in work and play.[25] Therefore, it was essential that bourgeois children were protected and sequestered in the domestic sphere with their mothers, who were also believed to be sexually disinterested and pure.[26] "Innocent childhood resembled the cult of true womanhood in that each discourse attached sexual innocence to white children and women, respectively," argues Robin Bernstein.[27]

Though feminist historians have argued for the porousness of the separate spheres—especially toward the end of the 19th century when women participated in reform movements like women's suffrage[28]—the prevailing Protestant classist view of the time was that the innocent child and pious mother belonged inside the home while

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[25] Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity*, 34, 46, 49.

[26] The so-called "cult of domesticity" was the prevailing ideology in the Victorian era that white mothers ought to be "pious, pure, domestic, and submissive." Of course, in reality, women did not consistently meet this ideal (Bernstein, 39). See also Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 113.

[27] Bernstein, 42.

[28] See, for example, Samuel Watson, "Flexible Gender Roles During the Market Revolution: Family, Friendship, Marriage and Masculinity Among U.S. Army Officers, 1815-1846," *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 81-106.

For women's roles in reform movements in the early Victorian era, see D'Emilio and Freedman on the Female Moral Reform Society, a group established in 1934 to convert female sex workers to Christianity. D'Emilio and Freedman write that after the Civil War (1861-1865), reform movements were on the decline (John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* [New York: Harper & Row, 1988 (2012)], 152, 154-155. eBook).

Scholar Gaines M. Foster writes that, rather, the Civil War "helped spur a new interest in using the federal government to regulate morality." If it could abolish slavery, then it could abolish other immoralities. Temperance became the first major reform movement after the war. Postwar reformers and early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton linked excessive drink (which was pervasive throughout the war) to women's unfair dependence on men's authority (Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002], 3, 27, 31).

Just as these women reformers sought to end the double standard regarding prostitution, they sought to end men's squandering of the family's wealth on alcohol (D'Emilio and Freedman, 157). These two vices, intemperance and prostitution, were linked in the late Victorian imagination as "twin evils," signs of moral decay (David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973], 25).

fathers worked and ventured outside the home.[29] Here in the hearth, it was the bourgeoise mother's responsibility to instill in her children Christian values, including teaching them about sex. This not only benefited the children, who with their "enlightened innocence" could avoid sexual ills like masturbation and sex with partners of a different class or race,[30] but it held significance to the success of the white, Protestant middle-class. Historian Sara Moslener writes, "Women's ability"—and by extension, their children's ability—"to maintain the virtues of religious piety and sexual purity allowed white, middle-class men to pursue economic success and thus reassure white, middle-class Protestants of their cultural dominance."[31] This connection between the sexuality of women, adolescents, children and white Protestant Christian supremacy remains an important theme in moral/sex panic discourse.[32]

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[29] See D'Emilio and Freedman, 176.

D'Emilio and Freedman write that during the Victorian Era, white middle-class women were viewed not as "Eve, the temptress" of previous generations but were thought to have fewer base inclinations than men had. Existing on a "higher moral plane than men," these women were the protectors of the private sphere against the temptations of the outside world, including excessive drink, untamed capitalism, and sexual deviance (90-91).

See Egan and Hawkes's section on masturbation phobia in *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity*, 24-31.

[30] Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity*, 41-42. D'Emilio and Freedman, 102.

[31] Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16.

For more on the extension of the cult of true womanhood in middle-class African-American communities, see Vicki Howard, "The Courtship Letters of an African-American Couple: Race, Gender, Class and the Cult of True Womanhood," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 100, no. 1 (July 1996): 64-80.

[32] As an example of white Protestant Christian supremacy: Edward J. Blum writes primarily of the years following the Civil War when northern whites—significantly revivalists like Howard Moody, Christian activists like Frances Willard, and even abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe—chose to put the unification of the war-torn country ahead of the radical liberation and inclusion of formerly enslaved

The story of sexual innocence, sensationism, and corruptibility was different for non-white children, especially Black children, in the Victorian era. While white children were presumed to be innocent unless influenced by "bad boys" and "bad girls" on the playground,[33] Black children were viewed as sexually precocious, insensate, and cursed from the start. The presumed racial inferiority of Black persons had been a part of the American story long before the 19th century but took a particular shape in the years before and after the Civil War, as ideologies of white supremacy were forged as part-and-parcel to Protestant evangelical identity. "During the nineteenth century," writes Edward J. Blum, "almost every aspect of American Protestantism was permeated by whiteness." This included a little white evangelist, Eva St. Clare, and her creator, Harriet Beecher Stowe.[34]

In her text on childhood's role in constructing race and perpetuating racism, Bernstein shows how this conception of childhood innocence—"itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness—secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status, in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries."[35] Bernstein uses the novel and subsequent stage adaptations of the abolitionist work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* to unpack the intersections between childhood and racial innocence in the ante- and postbellum eras. Rather than rehash Bernstein's work, I will look at two relationships in the novel—

Black folks (Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism 1865-1989* [Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 2005], 3-4).

[33] Egan and Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity,* 46.

[34] Blum, 9.

[35] Bernstein, 35.

between Eva and Tom, Eva and Topsy—that reveals a third connection, between childhood, racial innocence, and evangelicalism, a growing religious movement of the time. Indeed, by the mid-19th century, many Protestants, even from traditional mainline denominations, considered themselves evangelical.[36] *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, illuminated by Bernstein's analysis, illustrates the entanglement of anti-Black racism, Protestant Christian supremacy, and the construction of childhood in U.S. history that has a bearing on us today.

In the preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Harriet Beecher Stowe—the daughter Lyman Beecher and sister of Henry Ward Beecher, both evangelical preachers and abolitionists—writes that the purpose of this story (first written as a newspaper serial) was "to awaken sympathy and feelings for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it."[37] An ambitious goal, the book set publishing records and, rather apocryphally, became known as "the book that started" the Civil War.

The story follows a number of characters—some slaves, some slaveholders—but most notably little Eva St. Clare, the daughter of a slaveholder, and Tom, a slave with whom Eva has a tender and intimate relationship.[38] The two meet on a boat traveling

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[36]After the Second Great Awakening, evangelicalism grew "rapid and broad." By 1855, the evangelical denominations, Methodist and Baptist, accounted for 55% of the U.S. population. Even those who belonged to "old-line denominations," like the Episcopalians and Presbyterians gained evangelical branches (David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 51-52).

[37] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly,* ed. Christopher G. Diller (Claremont, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2009), 45.

[38] I have chosen to use the term "slave" to describe Topsy and Tom, rather than the preferred language of "enslaved people" by contemporary African Americans and antiracist activists. While it is

down the Mississippi River toward the St. Clare plantation in New Orleans. Eva is just five or six at the time, viewed by Tom as having a "childish beauty" and "innocent playfulness"; he cannot stop watching her "flying hither tither" around the deck. Just after we get this description of Eva, we get a description of Tom that is not so unlike hers, though they are people of different ages, races, and sexes: "Tom, who had the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike, watched the little creature with daily increasing interest."[39] The two make acquaintance, and not long after, Eva loses her balance on the railing of the boat and falls out into the Mississippi River. Tom jumps in and rescues her. Out of gratitude—and Eva's urging—her father, Augustine St. Clare, buys Tom and brings him home to their New Orleans planation to live and work.

Tom's childlikeness reflects one prevailing view of Black adults[40] during the 19th century and into the 20th: that they are inherently child-like and unable to grow into full (white male) adulthood. Stowe herself describes those of the Black race as having a "childlike simplicity of affection."[41] In a well-known scene of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, due to its widely circulated illustrations,[42] Tom and Eva sit closely in the arbor, reading the

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absolutely necessary to recognize enslaved African peoples as full human subjects and agents, Topsy and Tom were neither full subjects nor agents in Stowe's imagination. As characters—and caricatures—their identities dwelled primarily in their enslavement.

[39] Stowe, 188-189.

[40] Another prevailing view of Black adults at the time were that of the sexual predator (men) or seducer (women).

[41] Stowe, 222.

[42] The illustration of Tom and Eva in the arbor appeared on playing cards, decorative plates, jigsaw puzzles, mugs, postcards and was used in advertising. For visual examples of these "Tomitudes," see Stephen Railton, "Uncle Tomitudes," *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture,* University of Virginia, 2012, accessed March 15, 2021, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/tomituds/tohp.html.

Bible together. The two exhibit an intimacy that reflects their shared Christian faith and childlike sensibilities: as if peers, not man and child, slaveholder and slave. “The friendship between Tom and Eva had grown with the child’s growth,” writes Stowe. “It would be hard to say what place she held in the soft, impressible heart of her faithful attendant. He loved her as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine.”[43] And yet, the actual imbalance of their relationship—despite the racial innocence imbued by Eva and her “heavenliness”—is ultimately what creates scandal.

Some have read the relationship between Eva and Tom as pedophilic, that the love between the enslaved man and girl is scandalous because of their age differences, alongside their racial differences. However, as Bernstein shows, the evidence is scant for this in Stowe’s text, as Eva shows more physical affection—hugs and kisses, especially—for Mammy than she does for Tom.[44] In pre-Freudian 1852, childhood was asexual, no matter the number of hugs or kisses. What was perhaps more scandalous at the time was the suggestion of love between a male and female of different races. This love—pejoratively called miscegenation, or the “mixing” of races—would disrupt the Southern social order, believed to be God-ordained.[45] Bernstein argues for this reading, over the scandal of pedophilia, by considering the popular Hammatt Billings illustration of the above-mentioned arbor scene. In the first edition of the novel, Billings’s image of the arbor scene appears perpendicular to the text. In the perpendicular scene, Tom appears

[43] Stowe, 300.

[44] Bernstein, 92-93.

[45] Heltzel, 22.

over Eva, a kind of "missionary position," with Eva at the bottom. "The initial image thus enfolds within it racist anxiety about not only interracial sexual contact, but also the relative political positions of black and white," writes Bernstein. When the reader turns the book clockwise to straighten out the image, they perform a re-establishment of the "God-given" hierarchy. Tom is no longer above Eva. And Tom's profile, no longer nose tipped toward Eva, appears more like the era's phrenological drawings of Black men. "The reader terminates the instability by turning the book," Bernstein writes. "The reader topples Tom from the superior position and slides Eva out from beneath him; the reader empties the scene of sexuality by uncoupling the characters and repositioning them side-by-side."[46] The reader reasserts the social order, at least until they must turn it back 90-degrees counter-clockwise to read the next page of text. Perhaps what this performative function reveals more than anything is that, even in a culture that values women principally for their domesticity and purity, a young white girl like Eva, who will never even reach white womanhood—she dies just four chapters later—is still deemed racially superior to a grown Black man. White children have the potential for white adulthood; Black children are thought to remain forever "childlike," as Stowe describes, even into adulthood.[47]

On the planation, we meet more characters, including Ophelia—Augustine's Northern cousin who comes to live with them—and Topsy, the slave girl bought for the

[46] Bernstein, 109.

[47] Stowe, 222.

sole challenge of Ophelia civilizing her.[48] Topsy is set up as a foil to Eva.[49] If Eva is described as "innocent," "divine," and "always dressed in white," Topsy is "goblin-like," "heathenish," and dressed in "filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging." If Eva has "long golden-brown hair that floated like a cloud around it," Topsy's "woolly hair . . . stuck out in every direction." Her refrain is, "I's wicked." Why does she steal? Why does she dress herself in Ophelia's clothes and parade about? She's "mighty wicked." [50] Womanist social ethicist Emilie Townes interprets Stowe's description of Topsy as purposefully "dehumanizing," meant to reveal how the system of chattel slavery was what made Topsy so "wicked"; it was not something innate within her. "Yet, Stowe's description of Topsy remains troubling," Townes writes. ". . . In all that Stowe attempts to do in speaking out against the institution of slavery, she clings to an imagery that never allows Topsy to be seen as fully human or humane. . . . Stowe, regrettably, repeats the very dehumanizing process she seeks to critique."[51] Bernstein agrees that Topsy reveals the inherent, and inherited, white supremacy of Stowe, despite the abolitionist's individual efforts toward anti-racism; however, Bernstein argues that Stowe is skillfully suggesting that the differences between Eva and Topsy are merely environmental or learned behaviors. As

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[48] In the years during and after the war, white Christians from the North ventured into the South to educate and aid newly freed Black persons (Blum, 60).

[49] This is not difficult to ascertain. Stowe writes, "There stood the two children [Eva and Topsy], representations of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages and cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!" (288).

[50] Stowe, 189, 280, 287.

[51] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 140.

different as the girls are, Eva and Topsy come from a common human ancestry (monogenesis), Stowe argues, against many of her contemporaries.[52]

Topsy asks Ophelia to beat her—often. And Ophelia is not entirely opposed to it. "I's used to whippin'; I spects it's good for me," Topsy tells her mistress.[53] This plays into the common idea of Black children as insensate or unfeeling, that physical beating was a way to steer them in the right direction (á la Wall's "top-down model") and mythologized that the beatings were pain free. Stowe uses this assumption of Black childhood, then challenges Topsy's un-"hurt-ability" by letting Eva penetrate Topsy's outer self (her learned behavior) to get to her essential self (her sensate humanity).[54] When Eva gets sick and is on the verge of death, she in her fragility converts Topsy to Christianity. Topsy has gotten herself into trouble again, this time for cutting up Ophelia's bonnet to make clothes for her dolls. Ophelia drags Topsy before the St. Clares, and they discuss what to do about her. Augustine asks his cousin Ophelia why she would bother supporting missionaries traveling to the South if she herself could not train this one child in Christianity? Perhaps her "Gospel is not strong enough," the areligious St. Clare suggests.[55]

Eva overhears this and brings Topsy to her. On the verge of tears she asks the girl, "What makes you so bad, Topsy? Why won't you try and be good? Don't you love *anybody,* Topsy?" Topsy insists that no, she doesn't love any person; no one loves her,

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[52] Bernstein, 44.

[53] Stowe, 292.

[54] Bernstein, 45.

[55] Stowe, 322.

either, on account of her black skin. In "a sudden burst of feeling"—and significantly, "laying her little thin, white hand on Topsy's shoulder"—Eva declares, "I love you, and I want you to be good." With this, as a final blow to the assumption of Black un-hurt-ability, Topsy weeps and believes in the Jesus that Eva preaches to her. "Don't you know that Jesus loves all alike? He is just as willing to love you, as me. He loves you just as I do,—only more, because he is better."[56] Bernstein summarizes the significance of this scene:

> Only the touch of Eva's "white hand" combined with declarations of love for Topsy as a "poor, abused child" transforms "the black child." At the moment, a "ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love" penetrates Topsy, and for the first time in the novel, she weeps. It is in this scene that Topsy is converted to sensation, into humanized childhood, and even, Eva promises, potential angelhood—"just as much as if you were white."[57]

Soon after this episode, Eva dies. Eventually, Topsy leaves New Orleans to live with Ophelia in the North and is baptized in the Christian faith.[58] We are told she grows into a proper young woman, not wholly unlike the "true woman" of the white middle class. While Stowe may have successfully argued against Black insensateness through the figure of Topsy, a Black slave child, she did it through the figure of the innocent white—and, I argue, Protestant—girl-child.[59] The only way Topsy's wicked behavior could end and her insensate nature be penetrated was through a "little Evangelist," a white girl who embodied the innate innocence and goodness of 19th century childhood. *Uncle Tom's*

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[56] Stowe, 323-324.

[57] Bernstein, 47.

[58] Stowe, 471.

[59] Bernstein writes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "The refutation of the libel of black insensateness was one of abolitionism's most effective strategies and greatest triumphs" (51).

Cabin shows the entanglement of race and Protestant Christianity in the construct of childhood as it existed in the post-Enlightenment U.S. The story of Eva, Tom, and Topsy evolved, however, to reify the Black stereotypes Stowe sought to dispel. As the story evolved from the written form to taking the stage, Tom, meant to be a Christ figure in Stowe's novel, came to represent Black men eager to please white people. The insensate Black girl that Topsy defied was transferred onto the pickaninny, a racist trope of the wild and unfeeling Black child. Bernstein writes: "the pickaninny transformed Stowe's critique of racist violence into an apology for it."[60] These racist tropes persisted through the rest of the century and beyond. By the end of the 19th century, however, immigrants from Eastern-European countries came to the United States in increasing numbers, complicating the black/white binary that ordered the country's views on innocence and deviance.[61] At the same time, a new category for age emerged—adolescence—that would bear the racial complexity childhood innocence could not.

Adolescence

Gabrielle Owen writes that the setting apart of adolescence from childhood and adulthood reflected other social categorizing at the turn-of-the-century, like the passive female and active male, the homosexual invert versus the healthy heterosexual,[62] and the

[60] Bernstein, 54.

[61] Of course, Native Americans complicated the binary as well and did so and prior to the turn-of-the-century. Sally Kitch addresses this in her book, *The Specter of Sex,* by examining the ways in which American Indians functioned as "middle bloods" to English settlers, having "special privileges" that Black people did not have and to reiterate the privileges and freedoms that white settlers did have (Sally L. Kitch, *The Specter of Sex: Gendered Foundations of Racial Formation in the United States* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009], 127-128).

[62] D'Emilio and Freedman write, "By the end of the century, physicians employed a medical language, referring to sodomy not as a sin or a spiritual failing, but rather as a disease and a manifestation of a bodily or mental condition" (139).

racial othering of non-Anglo-Saxons.[63] These categories "functioned primarily as new ways of maintaining existing social hierarchies" and interdependently necessitated the other for definition.[64] That is, if there was a category for health, then there was a category for illness; if there was a category for good, then there was a category for evil. Adolescence emerged as a third category among many binaries, and as such, represented deviance or in-betweenness—sometimes both.

Scholars often name G. Stanley Hall, a turn-of-the-century pedagogue and psychologist, as the originator of adolescence, particularly for his groundbreaking, two-volume work, *Adolescence,* which links success in this period of a young man's life to the success of a nation and for his theory of recapitulation, which states that "the embryos of more 'advanced' species are said to represent the adult stages of more 'primitive' species." Recapitulation, developed first by Ernst Haeckel in the 1860s but expanded by Hall, was weaponized to "rank humans according to racial characteristics, with the white European male ranked above all others."[65] Non-Anglo races, then, were described as child-like—much like the Black race in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—or if sexually mature,

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[63] The categories of white and black extended beyond the binary as more European immigrants came into the U.S. at the turn of the century. The category of white "Anglo-Saxons" or "Nordics" versus all others became a more useful category for racial separation and domination. See Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusaders: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 15. See also Jane Dailey, *White Fright: The Sexual Panic at the Heart of America's Racist History* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 39.

To consider how these categories intersect, see "Chapter 4, 'He Was a Mexican': Race and the Marginalization of Male-to-Female Cross-Dressers in Western History" in Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 130-158.

[64] Owen, 45, 46.

[65] Owen, 50.

"adolescents of adult size."[66] Though Anglo-Saxon children could pass through adolescence into adulthood, those of other races could not; they would forever be adolescents.

Owen places Hall's recapitulation theory within a broader tradition of developmentalism, consistent in Darwin's writings as well as Hall's: "Developmentalism imagines that change occurs in one direction toward an eventual goal, producing a hierarchy in which earlier stages are inferior stages." This change can happen on an individual level, a species level, or a societal level. Owen continues, "The developmental arrival point"—adulthood, in this case—". . . is defined as inherently normative, evoking characteristics such as whiteness, masculinity, and wealth."[67] Therefore, all who are not white, male, and economically stable adults are considered insufficient in some way. "Through the logic of developmentalism, childhood and adolescence began to function as temporal categories in which any marginalized person or group could be relocated along a developmental timeline as regressive, immature, or undeveloped," writes Owen.[68] For young white males, there is hope—for Hall, with a manly education of wilderness training; for young women, ethnic whites, or the working poor, there is little hope for reaching normative white male adulthood.[69]

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[66] G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence*, Volume I (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 649.

[67] Owen, 53-54.

See chapter 3 for a conversation on developmentalism within psychology and ethics.

[68] Owen, 46.

[69] Hall, xi.

Hall viewed the period of adolescence as the most important time in a young white man's life, where he could either grow into a healthy "normal" adult or become particularly susceptible to diseases like neurasthenia, a kind of anxiety or melancholia that affected middle- and upper-class Anglo-Saxon men by turning them effeminate and weak (that is, woman-like). Neurasthenia was thought to be caused by the realities of modern society: increased urbanization, too much time indoors, and the exercising of brains instead of muscles.[70] To prevent such a disease from overcoming a young white male, Hall recommended a special education, where boys were encouraged to channel their sexual energies (ever brewing at this time) into physical activity;[71] this was a healthy alternative to repression or chronic masturbation, the latter of which plagued the young Hall.[72] If a young man were able to be properly civilized—that is, outdoorsy but not savage like the "lower" races, educated but not *overly* civilized, like the neurasthenic man—he could develop into a healthy white man, a shining example of his race.[73]

Hall spoke mostly of and to the young adolescent male but gave some advice to young women who were on their way to joining the cult of true womanhood: education was not good for their "reproductive capabilities," nor did they need to act as rough riders

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[70] Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 86-87.

[71] The Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910.

[72] Hall, xi. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 81.

Taking a cue from Sigmund Freud, Hall believed that psychic disorders, like neurasthenia, were rooted in a person's sex life (285).

[73] Blum writes that ". . . American 'civilization' . . . was shorthand for Protestant Christianity, consumer capitalism, and racial hierarchies" (212). It was certainly gendered as well.

in the great outdoors.[74] Hall saw girls as "more governed by adult emotions"; they did not need the same careful education into adulthood (indeed, it was considered dangerous to their reproductive organs), but nor could they, as women, be moral exemplars of their race.[75] Contemporaries of Hall, like sexologist Silas Weir Mitchell, were worried that neurasthenic young women, who were gaining independence through the suffrage movement and economic societal changes, would turn to other women for sexual relationships, becoming sexual deviants or "inverts." Or, they would cause the retrogression of society by instituting a matriarchal system.[76] Thus the "normal" adulthood presented as the opposite of the "deviant" adolescence—or "savage" childhood, in Hall's view—was only achievable by some: most notably white, middle- and upper-class young men.

Owen summarizes the conceptualization of childhood and adolescence through the 19th and 20th centuries, hinting at the linkages between age, race, and gender:

> As for childhood the nineteenth century aligned childlikeness with animality, the primitive, the savage, and the not-yet-human at the same time figuring the child as innocence, pricelessness, potentiality, and the future. As for adolescence the [turn-of-the-] twentieth century imagined the teen years as out of control, deviant, criminal, and the failed-to-become-human at the same time as it idealized youthfulness, rebellion, and freedom from adult responsibility.[77]

Whether positive or negative characteristics, these descriptors come from a dominant white male perspective, often projecting one's own experience of childhood and

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[74] The "camp cure" of the great outdoors was sometimes prescribed to women too, though more often they were prescribed bed rest instead (Boag, 178).

[75] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 103.

[76] Boag, 180.

[77] Owen, 147.

adolescence onto others. Children and adolescents are deployable symbols—for good, for evil, for everything in between—not humans in their own right. We will see in the next section how the figure of the Child or Teen is wielded in three purity movements—described best as moral/sex panics—setting the stage for how we might understand adolescent sexual and moral agency apart from adult conceptions and projections (chapter 3).

THREE MORAL/SEX PANICS

Over the next century, from the late 19th to late 20th centuries, the white Teen was situated by sociologists, evangelical leaders, politicians, and her parents at the center of at least three moral/sex panics. The Teen herself was not recognized as her own person with legitimate desires but was used as a symbol of purity in some instances or a fear in others. First, we meet the Country and City Girls of the turn-of-the-20th-century who are tricked into vice. Then comes the Teen of the mid-20th century who holds the weight of the nation on her shoulders. Then finally, we meet the Teen at the center of the contemporary evangelical purity movement whose chastity is at the heart of Christian teachings and sex education.

Social Purity Panic: Country Girl and City Girl

Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States underwent a series of related shifts: the so-called "closing of the frontier" and the seven-fold increase in urbanization, which blurred the boundaries between urban and rural, middle-class and working-class;[78] the birth of corporate capitalism which broadened white bourgeois

[78] See Boag. Statistic from Donovan, 22.

men's access to leisure time and challenged their perceptions of themselves as hardworking Protestants;[79] the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and China that complicated the black/white binarism that had dominated the construction of race in the country up until this point; and the Victorian true woman of the domestic sphere was replaced by the new woman, who ventured out into the public and fought for her right to vote.[80] These major shifts contributed to a heightened anxiety of the time, giving rise to several moral/sex panics, couched within broader reform movements. As with the moral/sex panics of other generations, much of the country's collective anxiety was placed onto the bodies of adolescent women, to both protect and regulate.[81]

Syncretistic with the major cultural shifts of the turn-of-the-century United States came an "ambitious" and widespread reform movement: social purity.[82] The movement maintained that a person's personal purity—whether hygienic, eugenic, racial, or sexual—had an effect on society as a whole. Social purity built on the reform movements of previous generations—e.g. abolition and Civil War era moral reform—and united leaders who previously had different goals and agendas: feminists, anti-feminists, (new) abolitionists, Darwinians, evangelicals, Catholics, doctors, mothers, Black racial uplift

[79] "Now, consumer pleasures and commercial leisure promised men more palpable rewards than Christian self-denial and hard work" (Donovan, 114). See also Gail Bederman, "'The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough': The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, eds. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 107-140.

[80] D'Emilio and Freedman, 172. Blum, 211.

[81] J. Shoshanna Ehrlich, *Regulating Desire: From the Virtuous Maiden to the Purity Princess* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 80.

[82] D'Emilio and Freedman, 158.

reformers, and pedagogues.[83] By the 1890s, the movement had become a national project, condensing many targets of reform—hygienic practices, alcohol consumption (via anti-saloon, temperance, prohibition movements), prostitution, and obscenity. Social purity reformers worked to eliminate vice to better society. For evangelical reformers, this meant bettering society in order to hasten the Second Coming of Jesus.[84]

One moral/sex panic under the umbrella of social purity was the white slavery scare—the fear of "a widespread traffic in women that sold young girls into virtual slavery"—punctuated by the passing of the Mann Act of 1910.[85] The Mann Act prohibited trafficking young white women across state lines for "immoral purposes."[86] However, the law was broad enough, and the fear of non-Anglos strong enough, that if a white woman were to travel with a man of a different race, he would be suspected of such trafficking. The underlying assumption was that young white women would not travel—i.e. have sex—willingly with a man of a different race; if she did, it was because of her own ignorance or corrupted innocence. According to the logic of social Darwinism, a young white woman's responsibility was to mate with only the "fittest" of men, meaning those of her same (white) race. This was not wholly unlike G. Stanley Hall's conception

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[83] See Pivar, "The Emergence of the Social Purity Alliance, 1877-1885," 78-130.

Ehrlich writes, "Reflecting the evangelical fervor of the times, [female moral reformers'] campaign emerged out of a broader moral reform crusade to cleanse the nation of sin, which included an effort to save the souls of fallen women" (8).

[84] Most 19th century evangelical reformers were postmillennials, meaning they believed that humans could usher in the Second Coming of Christ by initiating the millennium or the 1,000-year reign of Christian ethics.

[85] D'Emilio and Freedman, 198.

[86] Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 56, cited in D'Emilio and Freedman, 200.

of race and age a few decades prior. The decisions a young woman made, or was tricked into making, had consequences for her and for society as a whole. In this case, it alluded to the possibility of miscegenation and the breeding of "inferior" children. This fear was also associated with Catholic families who raised more children than white middle-class Protestants at the time and was heightened due to increased urbanization and the mingling of races and ethnicities in tenement housing.[87]

We will focus on two competing narratives in order to understand the white-slavery scare, and the social purity movement more broadly: the story of a *pure* middle-class country girl who is deceived by a sly racial other and the story of a *problem* working-class girl who through being "exposed" to sexuality becomes a "sexual delinquent."[88] These two stories show the shifting panic over young women's sexuality within the social purity movement. In the early stages of the movement, young bourgeoise women were believed to be—like children—innocent and passive, easily deceivable if put into dangerous situations. By the Progressive Era (1896-1916), however, these young women, like their non-white and working-class counterparts, were seen as having both the potential to be corrupt, and for corrupting others. Much of the corruption/corrupting happened in the "cruel, dangerous, and unforgiving" city, a reflection of the growing fear and suspicion of urbanization, particularly for how it provided means for heterosocial and interracial activities.[89] The city was where

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[87] This was certainly a fear of Margaret Sanger and the early birth control movement. See R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 1-47.

[88] Ehrlich, 72, 70.

[89] Quote from Donovan, 22. Boag, 177.

bourgeoise women led anti-saloon and anti-prostitution reform, not raise a family or socialize.[90]

The plot of Reginald Wright Kauffman's 1910 cautionary tale, *The House of Bondage*, was one of many white slavery novels that warned young women and their mothers about the dangers of city life.[91] In the novel, a 16-year-old country girl, Mary Denbigh, runs away to New York City with a young Hungarian Jew named Max.[92] She expresses love for Max,[93] but also for the thrill of freedom for the life in the city:

> New York, it appeared, was a city of splendid leisure. Its entire four millions of population spent their days in rest and their nights in amusement. … As [Max] spoke, though she did not know it, the far-off orchestras were calling her, as if the sound of the city deafened her to all other sounds, as if the lights of New York blinded her to the lights of home.[94]

Mary and Max never marry as she was promised they would. Instead, on their first and only night together in New York, Max convinces her to drink *vine*; never having drunk

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[90] Anti-vice crusaders Clifford Roe and Edwin Sims write specifically of the dangers of the urban environment, turning innocent country girls into (presumably worldly, dirty) city girls. Sims writes, "[Y]ou feel like saying to every mother in the country: Do not trust any man who pretends to take an interest in your girl if that interest involves her leaving your own roof. Keep her with you. She is far safer in the country than in the big city" (cited in Donovan, 29).

[91] The foreword to the book, Kauffman provides a "*caveat emptor*": "This story is intended for three classes of readers, and no more. It is intended for those who have to bring up children, for those who have to bring up themselves, and for those who, in order that they may think of bettering the weaker, are, in their own part, strong enough to begin the task by bearing a knowledge of truth" (Reginald Wright Kauffman, *The House of Bondage* [New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1910], https://archive.org/details/housebondage02kaufgoog/page/n10/mode/2up).

Not just novels, but white slavery tracts, plays, and films, too (D'Emilio and Freedman, 198).

[92] Curiously, Mary cannot decide whether Max is a boy or a man, perhaps contributing to his ability to deceive her (Kauffman, 8).

[93] Kauffman writes, "She belonged, as has been intimated, to a race in which motherhood is an instinctive passion and an economic necessity, and she was born into a class in which not to marry is socially shameful and materially precarious" (10).

[94] Kauffman, 20-21.

before, she has too much and slips into a deep sleep.[95] When she wakes up the next morning, she's naked and now a boarder—an "inmate"—in one Madam Rose Légère's brothel.[96] Girls like Mary in these white-slavery novels were often described as vulnerable and innocent, easily taken in by deceptive non-Anglos like Max. The books were written to warn these girls and their mothers of dangerous men that they could innocently and ignorantly fall into the company of. The true villains were the men; the young women: helpless, passive, and easily fooled.

As a moral/sex panic, the white-slavery scare juxtaposed the alleged trafficking of young white women with the reality of Black chattel slavery in the antebellum era. *The House of Bondage* was seen as an abolitionist novel just like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but for another race of people.[97] In fact, white-slavery tracts, "de-emphasized the brutality of chattel slavery in order to punctuate the horrors of white slavery."[98] The subtext is that these innocent young white women were not deserving of the horrors they faced—less so than the Black enslaved folks a generation before. In this is the erasure of these young women's sexual and moral agency, to choose to travel or fall in love with a man of another race.[99] These girls were instructed to "just say no" to city dance halls, theaters, ice cream parlors, hotels, streets, and parks where they could potentially, in passive

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[95] The book uses exaggerated dialect for Max, likely to emphasize his otherness.

[96] Kauffman, 51. The language of "inmate" is from Donovan, 23.

[97] The similarity of the names of Madam Rose Légère and the villain slaveholder Simon Legree in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not lost on critics at the time (Donovan, 36).

[98] Donovan, 32.

[99] Ehrlich writes, "Although unspoken, the complexities of these racial attitudes [regarding the white-slave scare] indicates that the bodies of young white women, who were the ones most likely to be making the perilous journey from the bucolic country to the city, were regarded as more deserving of protection that the marginalized and potentially corrupting bodies of young black women" (16).

construction, *be trafficked*.[100] This moral/sex panic also, of course, erased the experiences of Black people who were a generation or two removed from enslavement, yet faced the brutality of white supremacy ramping up in the post-Reconstructionist era. This was a time when young Black men were lynched precisely for allegedly raping white women.[101]

Evangelicals played a significant role in propagating the white-slavery scare as it erased young white women's agency, portrayed non-Anglo men (including Catholic and Jewish men) as villainous, and reified middle-class Protestant values. In the 19th century United States, evangelicalism emerged from three "streams" of domestic Protestantism: "a Baptist tradition that emphasized an individual's autonomy to claim salvation, a Wesleyan tradition that longed for the perfection of humanity, and a Reformed tradition that focused on God's authority over all creation."[102] Reflecting its aim of social outreach, and its Wesleyan perfectionism, 19th century evangelicals were at the forefront of social change: fighting for abolition, the reformation of prisons, better treatment of the

[100] Donovan, 26.

[101] Likely 1,000 Black men and women were lynched between the years 1889 and 1999. Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells estimated that 10,000 were lynched in the period after the Civil War to the turn of the century (Blum, 199). Often interracial relationships, especially between Black men and white women, were perceived to be coerced. See Bederman, "'The White Man's Civilization on Trial': Ida B. Wells, Representations of Lynching, and Northern Middle-Class Manhood," *Manliness and Civilization*, 45-76. James H. Cone, "'Nobody Knows de Trouble I See': The Cross and the Lynching Tree in the Black Experience," *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 1-29. Dailey, *White Fright*; Heltzel, "Revival, Race, and Reform: The Roots of Modern Evangelical Politics," 13-44. Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

[102] Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 14.

mentally disabled, and against societal greed.[103] Much of these reform movements came out of the revivals of the Second Great Awakening, with leaders such as Lyman Beecher in the 1850s and Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Movement (WCTU) in the 1880s.[104]

Due primarily to the labor of the WCTU, the "largest women's organization in the nineteenth century," the white-slavery scare became part of public discourse by the turn of the century. The WCTU saw evangelical Christian morality as the "solution" to white slavery and societal impurity more generally.[105] Like other female-led purity reformers of the time, the WCTU weaponized "Christian piety and fierce support for women's equality" to fight for their vision of a pure society, a society with a single standard of morality for both men and women that "deeply invested in the value of an orderly respectability" and purity. [106] Part of this task was to raise the age of consent from the single digits in some U.S. states to upwards of 16 to 18 years of age.[107] These laws portrayed young white women as vulnerable and in need of state protect against predators: the non-Anglo men who wanted to take advantage of them and "their youthful

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[103] David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism versus Social Concern* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 28.

[104] Sehat, 52. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 15.

[105] Donovan, 37, 41. See also Ehrlich, 42.

[106] Ehrlich, 43.

The WCTU and its leader, Frances Willard, weaponized the image of the Black male rapist in her campaigns against sexual vice. "Willard found it inconceivable that white women would take the initiative in an interracial sexual relationship,'" writes Donovan of Willard. "If white women instigated interracial sex only 'in the rarest exceptional instances,' then the vast majority of such unions were instances of rape" (Donovan, 49).

[107] Ehrlich, 44, 48. See also Pivar.

innocence." Reformers sought policy that would strengthen laws to essentially make it illegal for young women to freely consent to sex under a certain age.[108] These laws, then, functioned to erase young white women's sexual agency and placing them under the protection of the purity reformers and the legal state. "Closely entwined … with the belief that young women *could not* give true consent," writes J. Shoshana Ehrlich, "was an equally powerful belief that they *should not* be permitted to consent to sexual relations."[109] At the same time, these purity laws reified the image of the Black, Eastern European, or Jewish man as sexual predator. The WCTU in particular "often depicted African Americans, immigrants, and Catholics as aliens in the country who endangered the safety of the nation."[110] Ehrlich writes: "[B]y denying the possibility of authentic female sexual agency, the reformers sought to encode a narrow vision of respectability into law."[111] This respectability reflected white Protestant bourgeois values that often challenged the perspectives and experiences of non-Anglo, working-class, Catholic, and immigrant women.

Indeed, the lived experience of working-class and immigrant young women posed a "girl problem" for reformers in this time period. These city girls did not fit the script of

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[108] Ehrlich, 49.

[109] Ehrlich, 56.

[110] Blum, 200.

The WCTU's chapters were segregated and functioned independently—at the request of whites who insisted that the Black chapters included the word "colored" in their name to better differentiate them. In 1883, the WCTU founded its "Department of Work Among the Colored People," which was led by African-American writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, as an attempt to "battle . . . the racisms of the WCTU from within." The department was notoriously underfunded (Blum, 203). Many Black women, like Harper who were a part of the WCTU, were critical of Willard and the organization's refusal to "put its moral authority" toward protecting the civil rights of Black people (Blum, 204).

[111] Ehrlich, 60.

the young white woman as perpetual victim (the Mary Denbighs of the world) but seemed to actively participate in and pursue sexual behaviors, including sex work. The growing psychology and sexology of the time supported the belief that the "awakening of desire was a natural part of puberty in females and males alike"; therefore, it was expected that a modern girl would desire sexual pleasure. This did not allay the fears of purity reformers, however, who sought to curb the sexual behaviors of young women living in the cities.[112] They were particularly concerned with the environments these girls lived in, blaming the poverty and overcrowding of the tenement districts for the girls' sexual deviance. The reformers believed that working-class and immigrant girls were sexually delinquent because their families "failed to organize their lives in accordance with middle-class standards." Children ought to be "sheltered from the burdens of the adult world," according to these standards, and protected from the "moral dangers of the workplace." Purity reformers believed that once a young woman's sexual desire was "unleashed" through exposure to sexual touch or by witnessing the sexual behaviors of others—commonplace in crowded tenement communities—"her natural reserve would be eroded, thus leaving her vulnerable to the temptations of the flesh." There was hope for reform, however, but primarily for white ethnic immigrant and working-class girls; Black young women, as explored earlier in this chapter, were believed to be inherently sexually promiscuous.[113]

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[112] Middle-class girls also participated in sexual behaviors but, as Ehrlich states, "their behavior did not attract the same degree of attention and documentation as that of girls from the 'tenement districts'" (70).

[113] Ehrlich, 72-74, 69, 72, 75.

In some ways, this shift in concern from the innocent country girl to the so-called female sexual deviant opened the door to embracing female subjectivity and sexual agency in U.S. law and society. Ehrlich suggests this was true of white middle-class women in the 1920s, who participated in the growing heterosocial youth culture. Eventually, concern for the "problem girl" subsided as social purity movement came to a close. In the post-war years, the anxiety of the Cold War would be transferred onto a new "problem girl," the delinquent teen; but rather than purity reformers, evangelical psychologists and conservative political thinkers would be at the center of the discourse.

"The Way We Never Were": The Family-Values Panic of the 1970s

The site of sex, gender, religion, and youth culture changed tremendously from the eve of the 1920s through the early Cold War era. This period saw the sexual norms move toward liberalism and valuing sexual pleasure; norms that had been common with the working class and immigrants but now spread to the middle class as well. Companionate marriage was on the rise, rooted in values such as equality, happiness and pleasure; the sexual desire and fulfillment of not just men but women too; and easy-to-obtain divorce.[114] The Kinsey Studies of the 1940s and '50s disrupted commonly held assumptions about the ubiquity of same-sex desire, premarital sex, masturbation, and other previously illicit sexual behaviors.[115] In terms of gender, the separate spheres blurred as many middle-class women joined the workforce, American life became more

[114] D'Emilio and Freedman, 234, 250.

[115] See Griffith, 121-154.

D'Emilio and Freedman write that there were stricter sexual norms expected within Black communities at the time, particularly to challenge stereotypes about Black women's supposed promiscuity and Black men's supposed insatiable lust (255).

commercialized, and women earned the right to vote. In this time, write D'Emilio and Freedman, "Female purity lost much of its power as an organizing principle for enforcing sexual orthodoxy as young women and men together explored the erotic."[116]

A youth subculture blossomed in the 1920s, in part because of coed spaces like movie theaters and amusement parks and the invention of the car. White middle-class youth now, like urban working-class and immigrant youth previously, had the opportunity to socialize together without parental oversight. The double-standard challenged by the previous generation's purity reformers still existed between the genders: for boys, that meant they would have sex with the girls they would *not* marry in order to get experience but not hurt their future wives. Still, young men would "push," while girls "set the limit."[117] Adolescent behavior, especially sexual behavior, was a growing concern for purity reformers and religious leaders, especially for those who viewed youth as the great hope for the nation. They feared that youths' access to pornography corrupted them and led to juvenile delinquency—a threat to the country's future.[118] "The minds of youth, still in formation," writes R. Marie Griffith of the time, "needed protection from corrupt literature intended to arouse sensation and encourage debauchery, lest they be overtaken by lust and cease to be functioning citizens contributing to a well-ordered society."[119] This pivot to focusing on youth and their sex

[116] D'Emilio and Freedman, 203-204, quote on 228.

[117] D'Emilio and Freedman, 244, quote on 248.

[118] D'Emilio and Freedman, 274. See also Griffith, 159.

[119] Griffith, 58-59.

lives would become an important theme in the growing evangelical (neo-fundamentalist) movement of the post-war era.

Evangelicalism shifted in these years as well. By the late 19th century, a subsection of evangelicals desired to get back to the fundamentals of their faith.[120] This sect of evangelicalism, fundamentalism, is perhaps most known for its role in the Scopes Trial, or the "Monkey Trial," of 1925. In this trial, fundamentalist and three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan defended the decision of the Baptist State Board of Missions in Kentucky to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools against the American Civil Liberties Union and John Thomas Scopes, a local biology teacher.[121] Despite actually winning, the trial ultimately was an embarrassment to fundamentalists, causing the so-called "decline of fundamentalism."[122] Certainly, fundamentalism was fractured after the Scopes Trial, but that was not the death of conservative branches of evangelicalism. Fundamentalism continued to thrive under the leadership of evangelists like Aimee Semple McPherson who, unlike many of her contemporary fundamentalists, did not shy away from using modern media like radio and film to transform how

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[120] Bendroth, 3-4.

These fundamentals included a belief in the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Jesus' bodily resurrection, the inerrancy of Scripture, and premillennial dispensationalism against the ever-popular postmillennialist/perfectionist views. They were also specifically anti-intellectual when it came to reading Scripture (i.e. not relying on historical-critical methods).

[121] Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 90.

[122] Hankins, 104.

evangelical religion was experienced. She also helped bridge ties between evangelicalism and politics that are familiar to us today.[123]

Margaret Lamberts Bendroth identifies contemporary evangelicalism, or neo-fundamentalism, as the resurgence of fundamentalism birthed at the turn of the century. In line with the influence of Semple McPherson and her mass media evangelism, fundamentalists took a less anti-intellectual and less separatist approach to their faith after the embarrassment of the Scopes Trial.[124] By postwar America came the "dramatic displacement of mainline to margins and margins to mainline."[125] No longer embarrassed by the "Monkey Trial," evangelicalism in the mainline was led by household names Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Pat Robertson, who were not only vocal about their faith but about their politics as well. By the postwar era, these mainstream evangelicals would have a growing interest in politics as well, most notably in the election of the first evangelical president (Jimmy Carter) then in the emergence of the Moral Majority in the wake of Ronald Reagan's election and presidency.[126]

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[123] Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 6.

Semple McPherson was a Pentecostal, but she often downplayed her charismatic side to appeal to a larger evangelical audience.

[124] Bendroth, 5.

[125] Historian of evangelicalism Mark Noll, quoted in Angela M. Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

[126] For more on the rise of the Christian Right, see Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 2021). Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2020). Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The concerns of these decades culminated in what I am calling the family values movement. The movement, bipartisan at first, was grounded in the belief that the strength of the American family correlated directly with the strength of the nation: "As the family goes, so goes the nation."[127] Scholars like Leo P. Ribuffo date this ideology to Progressive Era concerns for the family: the purity crusades against personal vices that disrupted healthy families and affected the purity and strength of the country. These early purity campaigns and policies especially focused on women and children as vulnerable, as explored earlier in this chapter.[128] In the decades that followed came policies that reflected both liberal and conservative views of the family. In the 1930s, the New Deal rollout reflected the liberal concern for the family, especially with programs like the Fair Labor Standards Act which reduced child labor. Growing fears of Socialism led conservatives to link government intrusion to the destruction of the family.[129] Thus many conservatives rejected New Deal policies that would have strengthened the family for being too "Red."

The "nostalgia trap" of the 1950s and early 1960s was critical in the emergence of family values rhetoric. Feminist historians Elaine Tyler May and Stephanie Coontz argue that the elusive "traditional family" sought by liberals and conservatives alike in the late '60s and '70s was merely an illusion, belonging to a reinterpretation of the unusually stable 1950s. What these memories leave out are "the deep prejudices confronting

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[127] Moslener, 84.

[128] Leo P. Ribuffo, "Family Policy Past as Prologue: Jimmy Carter, the White House Conference on Families, and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right." *Review of Policy Research* 23, no. 2 (2006): 314, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.2006.00203.x.

[129] Ribuffo, 315-316.

minority families, the anxieties produced by the Cold War, the financial pressures on the majority of families, and the limited choices afford to most women."[130] Coontz argues that the "traditional family" never existed in the way we think it did—at least not in a single period of time. She calls this the "elusive traditional family" or "the way we never were."[131] For indeed, in the 1950s and early '60s, juvenile delinquency was on the rise, threats of atomic war made kids cower under desks, race riots overwhelmed the North while segregation thrived in the South, and the Red and Lavender scares found enemies among us.[132]

By the 1970s, political and social liberals and conservatives agreed that there was a country-wide decline in family values but could not agree on the cause or how to address it. Liberals were primarily concerned with economic problems—i.e. the rise in divorce rates, the decline in wages, the weakness of the Black family—and solutions—e.g. universal childcare, welfare, et cetera. [133] Conservatives were concerned with the moral permissiveness birthed out of feminist, gay rights, and civil rights. Second-wave feminists eschewed traditional marriage, enjoyed greater sexual freedom with the

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[130] Summarized in Dowland, 149.

[131] Dowland, 9.

[132] Griffith writes that the anxiety of the early Cold War era led people to hold tightly to conservative views on gender and sexuality (121). This was in some ways a reversal of the gains women made in the 1920s with their flapper dresses and bobbed haircuts (both signs of modernity and atheism, as fundamentalists warned).

[133] Matthew D. Lassiter, "Inventing Family Values," in *Rightward Bound,* eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14-15.

The 1965 Moynihan Report on Black families was used by politicians to both positive and negative ends (D'Emilio and Freedman, 285).

accessibility of the contraceptive pill, and demanded equal treatment in employment.[134] Gay men were perceived as the fault of weak, effeminate fathers.[135] Some evangelicals, especially those with roots in the South, saw the integration of schools as particularly concerning for the American family, as it could lead to miscegenation and the weakening of the white race.[136] It was the partial success of the movements that "upended" the "consensus" of the post-war era: that is, the perceived stability, especially of the nuclear family.[137] The solution of these conservatives was not to create welfare programs like the liberals but to address what they saw as the underlying moral issues.[138]

Politically conservative evangelicals were particularly keen in weaponizing the language of family values, so much so that by Reagan's election in 1980, "family values" was presumed to have always been a partisan concern and one uniquely tied to

[134] There was also an evangelical feminist movement at the time, which clung to evangelical theologies but believed in women's God-given equality with men. See Pamela H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

[135] Dowland, 157.

[136] In her history of the race and sex panic in the U.S. during Jim Crow (1880-1965), Jane Dailey argues that segregation in the South was primarily an effort to prevent interracial sex and marriage, both of which threatened the stability of white supremacy (44). In the early years of Jim Crow, laws against miscegenation or interracial marriage were defended in court with rulings like *State of Indiana v. Gibson* and *Pace vs. Alabama,* and in the public sphere, the races were kept separate from social interaction. The underlying racist logic was that "social amalgamation leads to illicit intercourse which leads to intermarriage," which led to biracial children and the dilution of the white race. Dailey writes, "Public schools, hospitals, trains, streetcars, restaurants, theaters—the list goes on—were segregated through the extension and application of this sexual logic" (20). Thought ending sex segregation was a complicated priority for many Black leaders through the early 20th century, by the cold war era, Black activists and groups like the NAACP made the end of sexual segregation one of its chief demands (57). This all culminated in the 1967 case, *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional (9).

[137] Dowland, 7.

[138] Lassiter critiques conservatives for not recognizing that their love for free market capitalism was hurting the "traditional family," not helping it (28).

conservative evangelicals.[139] With their disappointment in the first evangelical president (Carter), white evangelicals became an important voting bloc for the Republican party. Historian Seth Dowland explains:

> Evangelicals campaigned for family values by creating private Christian academies, by establishing home schools, and by rallying men to return to the faith. But these initiatives existed alongside other movements—opposing abortion, feminism, and gay rights—that won endorsement from the Republican Party. The vision of family values created a bond between evangelicalism and political conservativism.[140]

This was the time of the "culture wars," where conservative evangelicals—eventually the Christian Right and the Moral Majority—believed to be at war against immorality.[141] Influential pastor and expatriate Francis Schaffer[142] encouraged his fellow evangelicals to find "co-belligerents," those with whom they agreed on moral and political issues, but not necessarily religious views. For example, this concept of co-belligerency helped transform abortion from being a "Catholic issue" in the early 1970s to being of concern for conservatives of differing religious affiliations (including white Protestants and Mormons) and belonging under the banner of family values.[143] Dowland continues: "The phrase was capacious enough to accommodate a variety of initiatives but specific enough

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[139] By the 1970s, there was a break between politically and socially conservative evangelicals and politically and socially liberal (or "apolitical") evangelicals. See Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Durham, NC: North Carolina Press, 2014).

[140] Dowland, 2.

[141] See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics In America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

[142] Jerry Falwell was influenced by Schaeffer in his creation of the Moral Majority (Dowland, 121).

[143] Dowland, 118, 120.

to mark boundaries between conservative evangelicalism and broader society."[144] Through creative political maneuvering, and strategic co-belligerencies, conservative evangelicals became a powerhouse for conservative politics.

Both Schaffer and James Dobson, a leading evangelical psychologist, believed youth had an important role in the so-called culture wars, especially when it came to the issue of sexual purity. Dobson and his growing radio and educational empire, Focus on the Family, addressed the family values panic by addressing the role parents played in the raising of godly children: the underlying assumption being that children, and youth especially, have a responsibility in saving the nation. His first book, *Dare to Discipline*, came in response to what Dobson saw as the over-permissiveness in child-rearing, thanks in part to popular experts like Dr. Spock.[145] Dobson called his appeal to white, middle-class family values and structures "traditional" or "biblical," not, more accurately, Victorian. "Like purity reformers . . . before him," writes Moslener, "Dobson deployed tropes of sexual morality and national stability in order to make claims about personal morality and citizenship."[146] Drawing on G. Stanley Hall's developmentalism and recapitulation theories, and through the language of therapeutic discourse,[147] Dobson reached back to the 19th century to reinstate Victorian bourgeois family structures and

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[144] Dowland, 2.

[145] Moslener, 95-96.

[146] Moslener, 100, 101.

[147] There was a surprising, new authoritative voice at this time, emphasizing the importance of those traditional family values and sexual purity: the Christian psychologist (Moslener, 91). Conservative Christianity had had a shaky relationship with the social sciences as it did with evolutionary biology during the Scopes Trial (Griffith, 35-36). This "therapeutic Christianity" would continue to thrive throughout the 1970s, laying groundwork for the proliferation of Christian sex manuals in that decade and evangelical purity culture in the 1990s and 2000s. See Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

gender norms, and while doing so, remained ignorant to the ways in which he used white, middle-class families as a "rubric" for all families.[148]

Dobson emphasized the important role of youth in the fate of the civilization, but differently from his 19th century predecessors. A premillennial dispensationalist, Dobson believed that a period of tribulation (war, death, plague, natural disasters) would occur prior to Christ's return. Youth would act as a beacon of hope in a time of impending doom. Because of this, Dobson was particularly concerned with controlling adolescence, making sure teens lived up to their potential. Much like Hall before him, Dobson saw adolescence as a "critical moment" in a person's development.[149] In his 1978 book, *Preparing for Adolescence,* he advises parents to focus their energies on the *pre*adolescent child, who was most "pliant and receptive" to their guidance. Once a child reached late adolescence, it may be too late to intervene in a teen's choices: decisions that could have an effect not just on the individual but the family and nation as well. "[B]eware: if you let this fleeting moment escape unnoticed," writes Dobson, "you may never get another opportunity."[150] Just as bourgeois Victorian parents (especially mothers) had a role in instilling moral values in children, Dobson taught that parents have a responsibility to teach and discipline their children so that they do not conform to the

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[148] Heltzel, 105.

Such a rubric has a totalizing force, as it whitewashes racial difference and undermines programs and policies that would uplift struggling Black families. Organizations like Focus on the Family remain ignorant to the ways in which white supremacy caused the fracturing of the Black family unit, through chattel slavery, slave auctions, and contemporary welfare policies.

[149] Owen, 124.

[150] James C. Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1978), 9, https://archive.org/details/isbn_0884490459/page/6/mode/2up.

"new morality" of contemporary American society.[151] Only then could they be a beacon of hope.

Preparing for Adolescence was written for both boys and girls, yet this text and the other guides Dobson wrote for and about teenagers relies on strict gender norms—norms that were being challenged by second-wave feminists at the time. To Dobson, boys were wild and their natural inclinations toward sex needed to be tamed by women; and women should remain in the private sphere as moral authorities for their children—though not the "heads" of families, for that was the job of men.[152] Children ought to be disciplined and taught that sex belongs only within the context of a heterosexual marriage. Dobson believed that adolescents' "sexual morals were the last line of defense against the rampant moral relativism that threatened family stability."[153] Like the purity reformers of the 19th century and early 20th, Dobson placed his anxiety—and parents' anxieties—onto children, especially adolescent girls. Teenage girls, and later adult women, were responsible for keeping men's sexualities in line.[154] As an adolescent, this meant guarding her virginity.[155] Historian Daniel K. Williams elaborates:

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[151] Dobson, 110.

[152] See Anneke Stasson, "The Politicization of Family Life: How Headship Became Essential to Evangelical Identity in the Late Twentieth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2014): 100-138.

[153] Moslener, 96-99, 101-102.

[154] Moslener reflects: "What is curious about this proposition is that both [contemporary George] Gilder and Dobson resisted connecting these ideas with the concept of the sexual double standard," the double standard 19th century purity reformers fought so hard to upend. Dobson was unable to see what Victorian reformers understood so well: "If women behaved like men by embracing sexual freedom, then no one would hold men accountable for their failure to channel their sexual energy into productive work" (105).

[155] Moslener, 102.

> [T]he stability of the family required that sex be confined to marriage, and the continued existence of the nation—and indeed, of civilization itself—depended on maintaining the cohesiveness of the family. … [Evangelical leaders] therefore had to do everything possible to deter their young people from losing their virginity before marriage.[156]

In Dobson's view, female sexuality was "a commodity that reached the height of its value on the wedding day."[157] Making a connection between sexual restraint and economic restraint, Dobson and his contemporaries believed that a woman's job was to "civilize" men's "aggressive energy" into capitalistic enterprises. Failing to do so meant the "endangering of civilization itself."[158]

The evangelical view of the integrity of the family, youth's role in it, and the fear of liberal sexuality, expressed by Dobson and his contemporaries, laid the foundation for evangelical purity culture to thrive in the 1990s and beyond. Much of the same rhetoric was used—and indeed, many of the leaders and spokespeople the same—but this time with flashier, teenage-tailored messaging. Just as the "flower children" of the 1960s and '70s had their own youth subculture, young evangelicals were invited to actively participate in the culture war as a youth subculture unto itself.[159]

Contemporary Evangelical Purity Culture: The Beginnings

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[156] Daniel K. Williams, "Sex and the Evangelicals: Gender Issues, the Sexual Revolution, and Abortion in the 1960s," in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s,* ed. Axel R. Schäfer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 99-100.

[157] Moslener, 105.

[158] George Gilder quoted in Moslener, 105.

[159] See Larry Eskine's work on the Jesus People Movement and the evangelical youth subculture that came out of it in chapter 6, "The Jesus Kids," in Larry Eskine, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 145-178.

In July of 1994, thousands of teens gathered in a stadium for Christian rock music and to make a pledge to God, their parents, and their future spouses to not have sex until marriage.[160] In the decades following this first True Love Waits (TLW) rally, thousands of events like this would invite teens from all over the country, and throughout the world, to promise to remain abstinent until (heterosexual) marriage.[161] TLW was the brain-child of Southern Baptist youth pastor Richard Ross who was distraught to learn that "religious devotion was not a deterrent for adolescents engaging in sexual activity."[162] This led Ross to develop the abstinence-based sex education program, which grew out of a 56-member youth group and into a government-funded campaign,[163] hosting interdenominational rallies and producing branded consumer goods, including a True Love Waits Bible, planners, and purity rings.[164] The call to abstinence was no doubt a heavy burden for evangelical teens, who were told their decision at age 15, 16, 17 would affect the lives of their future spouses, children, and relationship with God. At the same time, because federally funded abstinence campaigns like True Love Waits were believed to course

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[160] Heather Hendershot, "Virgins for Jesus: The Gender Politics of Therapeutic Christian Media," in *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 91.

[161] Regarding the international influence of purity culture, see Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018), 260.

[162] Moslener, 111.

[163] According to Moslener, beginning in the 1980s, conservative evangelicals, who believed abstinence-based education would cure the country's ills of teen pregnancy, promiscuity, and abortion, brought programs like True Love Waits out of churches and into the political sphere. True Love Waits transcended religious, organizational, and national boundaries well enough to bring abstinence education to a wide audience (113). Moslener argues that "[the] emergence of the contemporary purity movement would not have been possible without federal initiatives that brought sexual abstinence into mainstream political discourse" (112).

[164] Moslener, 109, 111.

correct a nation on moral decline ever since the sexual revolution,[165] evangelical leaders saw that the burden of America's morality rested on the shoulders of these purity-devout teens.[166] The future of the nation, and the future of the teenager's marital and familial life, depended on her remaining pure until marriage.

The strategies of the evangelical purity movement and the burden it placed on young white women and white queer youth will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 4. However, it is worth noting here the ways in which this movement functioned as a recapitulation of earlier purity movements and moral/sex panics. Like the social purity and family values panics before it, evangelical purity culture capaciously defined *purity* to include a variety of appropriate behaviors and ideologies. "Instead of being forced to make lists of acceptable and unacceptable sexual activity," writes scholar Christine Gardner writes, "the [evangelical purity] campaigns [could] focus on purity, thus subsuming sexual activity under the general category of lifestyle choices pleasing to God."[167] That meant regulating a teenager's choice of clothing, friends, and media

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[165] Denny Pattyn, the founder of the Silver Ring Thing, an abstinence program similar to True Love Waits, "tells his teenage audience that adults have created the sex-obsessed culture that teens now are forced to live in" (Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011], 26). He says, "Forgive us, we adults, who have done this to you. . . . I challenge you to be the generation of change" (quoted in Gardner, 26).

[166] Moslener expands on this idea, writing, "For the purity movement, the main obstacle to national moral restoration remains sexual immorality, and sexual abstinence becomes the catalyst for course correction. Asserting this, the movement positions sexual purity, and the adolescents who embody it, as an embattled sexual minority poised to save America from the repercussions of its own moral turpitude" (113).

Moslener spends much of her chapter "New Purity Revolution" focusing on these political aspects of the purity movement, especially with regard to abstinence education campaigns like True Love Waits and the Silver Ring Thing; though fascinating, it does not fit within the scope of this chapter.

[167] Gardner, 31.

consumption, as well as her sexual activity.[168] Using the language of the "slippery slope," movement leaders taught that any intimate touch between opposite sexes, [169] like kissing, could lead to premarital sex.[170] This movement was not as overtly concerned with racial purity; however, as stated in chapter 1, white supremacist ideologies were embedded in how its leaders spoke and wrote about "social norms, values, structures, and institutions."[171]

Like the moral/sex panics before it, evangelical purity culture was primarily concerned with regulating the behaviors of young women. In her book on evangelical youth culture, Heather Hendershot writes that the evangelical purity movement was about body control, which looked different for adolescent girls and boys. Boys were taught that their bodies are out of control, even violent. They were taught, then, to channel that dangerous desire into physical activity, like weightlifting or other traditionally masculine activities.[172] But if this was not possible, ultimately the girl was responsible for managing the boy's desire, because her desire for sex is not predicated on uncontrollable physiology. Harkening back to Victorian ideas about women's moral authority, purity culture taught that women do not desire sex as boys do; they desire love and will endure

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[168] Gardner, 31.

[169] Hendershot notes that queer evangelical teens stand at the outside of this binary: while for heterosexual teens, abstinence in their youth could lead to sex within a Biblical marriage, queer teens were not given the same possibilities. Rather, their sexualities were considered as either a "venal sin" or a kind of addiction that needed curing (Hendershot, 113).

[170] Hendershot, 93.

[171] Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problems': Extending Emerson and Smith's *Divided by Faith*," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 347, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20486928.

[172] Hendershot, 105.

sex in order to get it. This does not encourage boys to understand their sexual desires as normal, and therefore manageable, but ultimately excuses sexual violence. "Crudely put," writes Hendershot, "when all bodily control is lost, boys give in to their urge to rape and girls give in to their urge to submit to rape."[173] If the boy could not control his body with his girlfriend, it was ultimately her responsibility to stop him from advancing. Unlike the purity reformers of the late 19th century, addressing the gender double-standard was not a high priority for the evangelical purity movement of the late 20th century.

Girls were taught a more complicated set of lessons about her body: that her purity must be protected at all costs; if she has sex, she was "damaged goods"; and she ultimately has to submit to higher male authorities despite being less desirous of sex than her male counterpart. Though it theoretically applied to boys and girls equally, purity was ultimately the responsibility of young women—and indeed, young *white* women who were "upheld as the ideal embodiment of sexual purity," even as purity culture existed in communities of color.[174] In her study of evangelical colleges, Donna Freitas writes that "evangelical girls are taught to protect their purity on four levels: mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically." An evangelical girl is taught by purity literature and teachings to be "asleep" sexually until her "prince comes along (at God's command) to 'wake her.'" The only appropriate time for such awakening is heterosexual marriage. In the meantime, girls were taught not to flirt, not to spend too much time fantasizing about

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[173] Hendershot, 93.

[174] Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 85. Elizabeth Gish, "'Are You a "Trashable" Styrofoam Cup?' Harm and Damage Rhetoric in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018): 6, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.2.03.

future marriage vows (especially not about the wedding night), and to dress modestly so as to not tempt good Christian boys. Thus, purity culture required a level of "self-surveillance," writes DeRogatis. "Evangelical young women who pledge to live the purity lifestyle are caught in a bind of constantly talking and thinking about the one thing they cannot do."[175] The payoff for all this waiting and self-surveilling was supposed to be amazing marital sex.[176] Yet, this remained unattainable for girls who did not remain pure before her wedding night.[177]

If these young women ultimately did not remain pure, the consequences extended beyond her own self and body to her father (whom she has broken a vow to), her church, her future husband, and society itself. The language of nuclear warfare is embedded in a lot of evangelical sex education curriculum. One Silver Ring Thing video production compares sexual protection in the form of a condom as akin to letting a child play with an atom bomb. In the video, the bomb inevitably explodes, reinforcing the message that there are national, and global, consequences for sexual impurity.[178] In the 1997 True Love Waits curriculum, *Until You Say I Do*, a teenage girl named Sarah's sexual relationship with an older man is compared to the state of the United States prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor: "Just like America ignored the message of the surprise attack,

[175] DeRogatis, 39.

[176] Gish, 15.

[177] It was also, of course, unattainable for those who did wait, as many, many scholars have shown. The wedding night is rarely as magical as the purity literature suggests it will be because of how sex has been presented as an evil in most contexts until suddenly it's not. See Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

[178] Described in Moslener, 165-166.

Sarah ignored all of the warnings in her relationship with Gary. She felt confident and in control of the situation, but she was setting herself up for a surprise attack." Beneath this text are the words: "Be Ready for Battle."[179] The war language equates a young person's, in this case a young woman's, purity with the strength or weakness of a nation.

On a more local level, the purity culture literature and curriculum like those above suggest that all sex before marriage is harmful, and young women's bodies are therefore damaged if they have sex before marriage. Girls are encouraged to think of their bodies as fungible objects or gifts: you would not want to give your husband a broken piece of pottery or an unrecyclable piece of trash. In her critique of the rhetoric of purity culture, scholar Elizabeth Gish writes that these "harm and damage" narratives rendered young women as incredibly vulnerable, reliable on the men around them and owing those men their whole lives (or at least whole bodies).[180] While her critique is valid, many contemporary conversations on evangelical purity culture, like Gish's "Are You a 'Trashable' Styrofoam Cup?" miss the historical beginnings of these movements, as they are grounded in white supremacist ideologies—no doubt because the racism was much more covert than in texts like *The House of Bondage* in 1910. The purity culture of the 1990s and 2000s reinforced white values by its language of purity and being "white as snow"; in emphasizing the heteropatriarchal family as the ultimate *telos* of marriage and sex; and its ignorance of other cultural and familial values outside of the white Western

[179] Jay Strack and Diane Strack, *Until You Say I Do*, A True Love Waits Resource (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 1997), 26-27.

[180] Gish, 9.

Protestant imagination. And, purity culture did this with a century of purity panic literature, policies, and rhetoric before it.

None of this means that girls—and for that matter, boys—were merely pawns of purity culture. We know that many teens chose to be a part of this purity movement and their decisions to wait to have sex were, indeed, decisions *they* made. Hendershot writes that teen participants in purity culture did "not merely internalize the chastity directive without substantial questioning, negotiation, and varying degrees of resistance. … Through their own Bible study, teens may end up rethinking, or at least complicating, the very rules that adults say the Bible teaches unequivocally."[181] Girls had opportunities to interpret what *purity* meant to her. (Was it waiting to have penis-in-vagina intercourse or waiting to French kiss?)[182] Thus, there was room within evangelical purity culture for some sexual and moral agency for young women, though her presented options were limited.

CONCLUSION

This chapter takes a sociohistorical look at the emergence of childhood and adolescence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially as children and adolescents have been at the center of a series of moral/sex panics centered on the issue of purity. Childhood and adolescence are unstable, culturally and historically bound categories for

[181] Hendershot, 101-102.

[182] Regnerus, in his study of the sexual habits of religious teenagers, found that oral sex was much more common among all young adolescents than vaginal sex, up to age 15. Then between the ages of 15 and 17, vaginal sex is more popular than oral sex. Some evangelical Protestants admitted to having oral and anal sex as a way to remain "technical virgins," although this was not as common as presumed. Only 13.3% of evangelical 15-17-year-olds studied believed themselves to be "technically virgins" for engaging in oral or anal sex but not vaginal sex, compared to 16.4% of all teenagers (Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 164-167).

stages of a person's life and are tied up in race, gender, class, and religion. Childhood and adolescent have been understood in ways that suggest that a child is not fully human, that adolescence is preparation for life and somehow not a valid part of life itself.[183] The Child and the Teen have been used for political and religious agendas as a means to expel adult anxiety of uncertain times. The *real* child and *real* adolescent, in the process, get erased. What if, though, we saw girls like Mary Denbigh of *The House of Bondage* as an agential young woman in her own right, who wittingly followed Max to New York as a means to escape her middle-class life in the country? What if we believed that the teen girl at the center of James Dobson's evangelical culture war was one who understood her sexuality as her own, whether she had sex outside of heterosexual marriage or not? These are the types of questions we will be attending to in chapter 3.

This chapter reveals the inextricably intertwined nature of the categories of age, race, gender, sex, class, and religion in the responses to these three moral/sex panics and in U.S. reform movements more broadly. Studying these panics through a singular lens does not reveal a full picture as to why young white women were placed in the center of these discourses; why adolescents could save the nation or harken the Second Coming of Christ; or why purity was the ultimate goal for evangelical teenagers. Taken together, these intersecting categories provide a complex story of how and why young bourgeoise white women have been and continue to be protected, shunned, stigmatized or used for particular political and religious agendas.

[183] Owen, 131.

CHAPTER THREE

REIMAGINING ADOLESCENT SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

In the final scene in Act I of the Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*,[1] the teenaged schoolboy Melchior pulls himself on top of Wendla in the hayloft while their families are at church.

> WENDLA: Melchi, no—it's just—it's . . .
> MELCHIOR: What? Sinful?
> WENDLA: No. I don't know . . .
> MELCHIOR: Then why? Because it's good? Because it makes us "feel" something?

The stage directions read: "Wendla considers, then suddenly reaches and pulls Melchior to her. She kisses him. He holds her, and gently helps her lie back."[2] The writers of the musical adaptation of this 19th century play describe the hayloft scene as love-making—though its original German author, and any astute feminist, would read the number of no's and hesitations spoken and unspoken by Wendla as an indication of date rape.[3] Still, it is this scene of penile-vaginal intercourse—or penetrative date rape—that is positioned as the pinnacle of the story and the height of Melchior's sexual discovery. It is a moment that he arrives to by himself, through his self-taught lessons on sexuality, which he shares with the other boys in his school through illustrated essays.

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[1] *Spring Awakening* is a 2000s-era Broadway musical that portrays a clash of generations—literally, in how the set, script, and costumes place it in late 19th-century bourgeois Germany; yet when the music kicks in, the actors pull out hand mics and jam out to contemporary rock music. As well, the musical displays the clash between teenagers and the teachers and parents in their lives.

[2] Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, *Spring Awakening: A New Musical* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), 59.

[3] Sater and Sheik, x.

As a story written and performed in the perspective of teenagers, a primary theme of *Spring Awakening* is the failure of adults to properly teach their children about sex.[4] The motif is laid out in Act I Scene I as Wendla begs her mom to teach her where babies come from, and her mother refuses to tell her.[5]

You could interpret *Spring Awakening* as an indictment against adults for not treating children as sexual and moral subjects but as wholly vulnerable and thus in need of control and protection (much like the protectionist agendas and policies explored in chapter 2). In the cast's singing, "O, I'm gonna be wounded / O, I'm gonna be your wound," they evoke the etymology of the word *vulnerable,* to wound.[6] These are vulnerable, wound-able, children. On the other hand, you could also interpret *Spring Awakening* as a revelation in child sexual agency, albeit a cautionary tale. Tragedy befalls most of the children in this play.[7] Premarital sex (or date rape) leads to abortion leads to death.

I instead suggest a reading of *Spring Awakening* that resists both of these interpretations, through queer theory critique and what childhood studies scholar John Wall calls "childism," or the critical lens that "deconstruct[s] adultism across research and societies and reconstruct[s] more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations."[8]

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[4] The only lesson one girl, Martha, receives is from her father who rapes her. Martha narrates: "'God, it's good—the lovin'—ain't it good tonight? / You ain't seen nothin' yet—gonna teach you right'" (Sater and Sheik, 46).

[5] "Mama who bore me / Mama who gave me / No way to handle things. Who made me so sad" (Sater and Sheik, 15-17).

[6] Sater and Sheik, 40.

[7] Indeed, its original Victorian-era subtitle is "A Children's Tragedy" (Sater and Sheik, vii).

[8] John Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism: Reconstructing the Scholarly and Social Imaginations," *Children's Geographies* (2019): 1, 10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912.

This queer and childist lens leads me to ask different questions of the play's characters and its moral messaging. Instead of centering the penetrative sex/rape in the hayloft as the defining moment for Melchior—one that leads to the "success" of procreation—what if we centered another scene? Not long before Wendla meets Melchior in the hayloft, a classmate, Moritz, comes by Melchior's house to return his handwritten essay on "The Art of Sleeping With…"[9] Mortiz is anxious and overwhelmed by sex and turns to Melchior to help him understand what makes it so alluring: "It truly is daunting—I mean how everything might. . . ." "Measure up?" Melchior asks. "Fit?"[10] In the stage production, the boys—Moritz, Melchior, now joined by the company of other boys—sing their inner longings and imagine what girls might erotically desire too. Melchior sings his part "as if in some hypothetical woman's voice":[11]

> Touch me—just like that.
> And that—O, yeah—now, that's heaven.
> Now, that I like.
> God, that's so nice.[12]

While this is being sung, Melchior stands behind Moritz, using Moritz's hands to caress his (Moritz's) body.

There is a certain queerness to this scene—a fumbling or failure by the teens on stage and by their offstage parents (and because of them) in failing to teach their children about sex. This scene "privilege[s] the naïve or nonsensical. . . ." Indeed, through

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[9] Sater and Sheik, 73.

[10] Sater and Sheik, 35.

[11] Technically this part is sung by Otto, perhaps in the perspective of Otto instead of Melchior; there are several discrepancies between the commentary and the stage production itself (Sater and Sheik, x).

[12] Sater and Sheik, 35.

Melchior's essay and song, "'[t]he naïve or the ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices,' where 'learning takes place independent of teaching.'"[13] Learning takes place, instead, in the company of other boys and in the touching of their own and others' bodies. Feminist social ethicist Kate Ott, drawing on queer theorist Jack Halberstam's work, calls this "orgasmic failure," or "a recognition of adolescent sexual subjectivity that values the erotic ethical encounter with self and other."[14] This scene is not one of heterosexual intercourse—it is not even necessarily imagining penis-in-vagina sex, as two boys in company are revealed to be queer lovers. Rather, it shows the complex desires of young people that may or may not lead to adult forms of sexual play. By centering this scene rather than the hayloft scene, we get a peek into children's sexual lives apart from the strictures of adult thinking, which gives us adults the freedom to understand youth on their own terms.

My analysis of *Spring Awakening* reveals the tensions between agency and vulnerability, autonomy and interdependence that I will explore more deeply in this chapter. For while chapter 2 addressed the historical-social constructions of the white Child and Teen as embodiments of helplessness, as one easily duped or influenced and in need of adult protection and surveillance, this chapter looks to the philosophical, psychological, and ethical arguments for understanding young people, especially young women and queer youth, as moral and sexual subjects and agents. In part 1, I set the

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[13] J[ack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 12, cited in Kate Ott, "Orgasmic Failure: A Praxis Ethic for Adolescent Sexuality," in *Theologies of Failure*, eds. Roberto Sirvent and Duncan B. Reyburn, 107-118 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 110.

[14] Kate Ott and Lauren D. Sawyer, "Sexual Practices and Relationships among Young People" in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality*, edited by Brian D. Earp, Clare Chambers, and Lori Watson (New York: Routledge, 2022), 258-270.

scene by answering the questions, what is sexuality? What is adolescent sexuality? In part 2, I look at the prevailing Western views of children and youth (especially girls) as lacking the autonomy required to be a wholly agential human being. I start with Enlightenment conceptions of autonomy, rationality, and agency, then move to developmental psychology, as expressed through developmental psychologists who, though centering children and adolescents, afford them little agency or room for difference. I then turn to childhood studies as a critique of developmentalism and expose its own shortcomings. In part 3, I challenge both the prevailing views of adolescent sexualities and subjectivities and agencies and imagine with queer, feminist, and childist scholars child and adolescent subjectivities and agency that are both complex and interdependent.

ADOLESCENT SEX(UALITY) IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

Our contemporary Western conceptions of sex and sexuality are different from those of the Victorian era when *Spring Awakening* was first written and in which the story is set, despite how timeless the play reads.[15] Like childhood and adolescence themselves, child and adolescent sexualities are "profoundly" culturally constructed.[16] Philosophy, the hard sciences, and the social scientific disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and sociology have tempted us into thinking that there is such thing as a universal, natural, or global childhood and adolescence, especially an asexual childhood and a sexually developing adolescence. Yet, as scholars like Diederik F. Janssen and

[15] See chapter 2.

[16] Diederik F. Janssen, "Anthropologizing Young/Minor Sexualities," in *Children, Sexuality, and Sexualization* eds. Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and R. Danielle Egan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 23.

others in the Foucauldian tradition have shown, even these presumably "objective" fields of study are imbued with power structures of whiteness, eurocentrism, adult-centrism, and heteropatriarchal assumptions that prevent us from having a truly objective view of childhood and adolescence.[17] Here I want to specifically turn my attention to contemporary understandings of childhood—and particularly adolescent—sexuality in the United States, itself riddled with assumptions about who teenagers are, what their sex lives are like, and what value we are expected to place on their sexual behaviors.

From a feminist theoethical understanding,

> Sexuality is an embodied component of the human capacity to know and a way to communicate and form of expression of one's self-understanding. . . . [S]exuality is more than the sum total of our sexual behaviors and [we] reciprocally gain understanding from others when expressing our sexuality. Our sexuality is developed in personal (and systematic) relationships affected by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces.[18]

Sexuality, then, is a part of who humans fundamentally are (ontologically) but develops both outwardly and inwardly through a person's lifetime in relationship to a wide range of factors. With this comprehensive understanding in mind, sexuality is not something beholden to adulthood nor is it only or primarily about what is often considered "sex," or genital contact of any sort. Sexuality "can (but doesn't have to!) include . . . sexual orientation, gender identity, ways we express or explore our sexual feelings alone or with other people, sexual interactions or relationships, and our feelings and thoughts about any of those things and about sex in general."[19] Sexuality can also more holistically describe

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[17] Ott and Sawyer.

[18] Kate Ott, "Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics: A Social Justice Obligation to Adolescent Sexual Health," in *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7, no. 2 (2007): para 11, italics in original.

[19] Heather Corinna and Isabella Rotman, *Wait What? A Comic Book Guide to Relationships, Bodies, and Growing Up* (Portland, OR: Limerance Press, 2019), 72.

a person's being-in-the-world, as an embodied person's means of self-expression. Sex, then, is one mode of sexual self-expression, whether solo (masturbation) or with others (vaginal, anal, oral sex, or non-penetrative sex).[20]

In the present-day United States, child and adolescent sexualities are written and spoken of primarily through the language of risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 10-year "Youth Risk Behavior Survey" includes statistics on sexual behaviors alongside drug use, violent behavior, and suicidality.[21] Articles on sex education tend to frame the need for education by listing the harrowing statistics of teen pregnancy rates in the U.S. (highest in the developed world); sexually transmitted disease occurrence ("Young people account for approximately 50% of all new STIs reported each year, and approximately 20% of all new HIV diagnoses");[22] teenagers' failure to use condoms (less than 2/3 of those engaging in sexual intercourse);[23] and how significantly more Black children are initiating sexual intercourse before the age of 13 than white or Hispanic children.[24] These articles and studies imply sex to mean intercourse, primarily

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[20] Corinna and Rotman, 72.

[21] "Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report 2007-2017." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[22] David C. Wiley, Marina Plesons, Venkataram Chandra-Mouli, and Margarita Ortega, "Managing Sex Education Controversy Deep in the Heart of Texas: A Case Study of the North East Independent School District (NEISD)," *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 15, no. 1 (2020): 53-81, https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2019.1675562.

[23] Lindsay M. Shepherd, Kaye F. Sly, and Jeffrey M. Girard, "Comparison of comprehensive and abstinence-only sexuality education in young African American adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 61 (2017): 50-63 and "STDs in Adolescents and Young Adults," *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2018*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 23, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats18/adolescents.htm.

[24] Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Sexual Health of Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States," August 20, 2014, accessed July 23, 2021, https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/sexual-health-of-adolescents-and-young-adults-in-the-united-states.

penile-vaginal intercourse,[25] and suggest that the goal of medical, religious, governmental, or educational interventions is to reduce the problem of child/teen sexuality (expressed through intercourse) by promoting either comprehensive sex education or abstinence-only-until-marriage education, depending on the institution. The underlying message of much of these articles, through their careful methodologies and data-gathering, is that adolescents are engaging in one fundamentally dangerous behavior (PVI intercourse), and we adults and institutions need to stop them (by promoting abstinence) or redirect them (by promoting condom use) in order for them to become "sexually healthy adults."[26]

No doubt sex can be risky for teens. Children and youth are uniquely vulnerable due to their physical size, dependence on parents or guardians for food and shelter, and with comparably less experience in the world than adults. These factors also put children and teens at risk for domestic and sexual violence.[27] But this story of risk, vulnerability, and violence is not the only story we can tell about adolescents (nor should adults be the only ones *telling* the story). Despite the panicked messages of the above articles and

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[25] Articles and studies focused solely on LGBTQ youth present a grim picture as well, as they focus firstly on rates of suicidality and homelessness among queer youth. See "2018 LGBTQ Youth Report," Human Rights Campaign, accessed July 23, 2021, https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/2018-YouthReport-NoVid.pdf?_ga=2.220918556.589193370.1627074282-1492192545.1627074282 and Ilan H. Meyer, Bianca D.M. Wilson, Kathryn O'Neill, "LGBTQ People in the US: Select Findings from the Generations and TransPop Studies," Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, accessed July 23, 2021, https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/generations-transpop-toplines.

[26] John S. Santelli, Leslie M. Kantor, Stephanie A. Grilo, Ilene S. Speizer, Laura D. Lindberg, Jennifer Heitel, Amy T. Schalet, et. al. "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact," *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 61 (2017): 275.

[27] According to the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN), "One in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult" and "[f]emales ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault" ("Children and Teens: Statistics," RAINN, accessed July 23, 2021, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens).

studies, American adolescents are engaging in sexual intercourse at a much lower rate than they did a generation ago; teenage pregnancy rates are much lower too.[28] Teens also have different means of expressing themselves sexually, through sexting and accessing pornography on their phones in the privacy of their bedrooms.[29] They have a broadening definition for what sex is, including oral, anal, and vaginal sex as well as mutual masturbation, masturbation, and sexting.[30] Teens have a broader range of categories for describing their sexualities (queer, asexual, demisexual, pansexual, bisexual, fluid, etc.)

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[28] Gladys M. Martinez and Joyce C. Abma, "Sexual activity, contraceptive use, and childbearing of teenagers aged 15–19 in the United States," *National Center for Health Statistics NCHS Data Brief* no. 209 (2015): 1, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db209.pdf.

Rates of STIs among teens, however, are increasing. See "STDs in Adolescents and Young Adults," and Chelsea L. Shannon and Jeffrey D. Klausner, "The growing Epidemic of Sexually Transmitted Infections in Adolescents: a neglected population," *Current Opinion in Pediatrics* 30, no. 1 (2018): 137-143, 10.1097/MOP.0000000000000578.

[29] See Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *Atlantic*, September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198 cited in Gabrielle Owen, *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 155.

Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, writes, "The decline in dating tracks with a decline in sexual activity. The drop is the sharpest for ninth-graders, among whom the number of sexually active teens has been cut by almost 40 percent since 1991. The average teen now has had sex for the first time by the spring of 11th grade, a full year later than the average Gen Xer. Fewer teens having sex has contributed to what many see as one of the most positive youth trends in recent years: The teen birth rate hit an all-time low in 2016, down 67 percent since its modern peak, in 1991."

[30] Note that this is contextual, as both Remez and Regnerus argue. Some teenagers claim oral or anal sex to not "count" as sex in order to remain "technical virgins" (Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 164). However, others view oral and anal sex under the same broad umbrella as sexual activity. Remez writes, "What young adults consider to be 'sex' also varies by contextual and situational factors, such as who is doing what to whom and whether it leads to orgasm" (Lisa Remez, "Oral Sex Among Adolescents: Is It Sex or Is It Abstinence?" *Family Planning Perspectives* 32, no. 6 [Nov.-Dec., 2000], 301, https://doi.org/10.1363/3229800).

Researchers Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak found that teenagers who are religiously affiliated are less likely than their secular peers to have sexual intercourse (31% compared to 60%); however, they found that evangelical teens were no more likely to postpone sex than those in Protestant mainline traditions, for instance. That is, evangelical teens who sign abstinence pledges are "not any more or less likely" than other religiously affiliated teenagers "to have had sexual intercourse or to have experience pregnancy or caused a pregnancy" (Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion, and Sexuality* [Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest, 2003], 35).

and gender identities than generations previous.[31] They have greater (and safer) avenues for coming out through organizations like the Trevor Project and the Safe Schools Coalition, social media and other online communities, as well as through religious organizations like Beloved Arise, led in part by other young people.

While teenagers have demonstrated their capacity to articulate their sexual subjectivities and exert their sexual agencies, adults and their institutions continue to regard children and teens as unformed adults, incapable of making reasonable/rational choices about their own bodies. Children and teens need to be passively protected and educated by well-informed adults in order to one day enact their full rational potential as adults. We can trace this view of adolescence back to Enlightenment-era thinkers, who deemed only certain people (adult white men) as capable of thinking rationally and independently. Just as I showed in chapter 2 that long-lasting views of children, youth, and women as asexual and "pure" led to protectionist policies and agendas in and outside American evangelicalism, Enlightenment concepts of personhood and agency—and later 20th century developmentalism—persist into the present day.

WESTERN FOUNDATIONS IN SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

In this section, I consider and critique two major schools of thought regarding childhood and adolescent subjectivity and agency—the Kantian tradition and developmental psychology—both esteemed as universal and global and thus a-cultural. I then turn my attention to childhood studies, birthed out of a critique of developmentalism (broadly). I'll demonstrate how although childhood studies corrects much of what these

[31] Language from "2018 LGBTQ Youth Report."

prior schools of thought presume about child and adolescent identity and development, on a whole it fails to attend to the complexity of youth subjectivities and agencies outside of an adult-centric lens. Ultimately, I will counter these foundations by offering a queer, childist, and feminist critique of agency and subjectivity.

Enlightenment Autonomy: Immanuel Kant

I start with the Age of Enlightenment in the Anglophone West (17th and 18th centuries) which exalted the individual person with his rights, liberties, and freedom from governmental or ecclesial tyranny. Of course, as generations of scholars from the margins have shown, Enlightenment projects were never intended to be truly universal, just universal among white European men or white landowning men. With global political revolutions and their expanding colonial domination, the fading power of the Catholic and Protestant Church, and the declaration of *I think, therefore I am,* the primary philosophical concerns shifted away from collectives to the individual: the individual adult male. As for children, then, the concern of some Enlightenment thinkers was in socializing boys into the ideal free-thinking man. Wall writes, "Childhood is patterned, in a way, on Enlightenment science itself: the march of progress in understanding nature now being applied to the march of progress in selves."[32]

Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) established the adult- and androcentric view of autonomy and agency that feminist and childist scholars have been contending with ever since. In his defining essay, "What is Enlightenment?" Kant urges his fellow adult European brethren to "dare to know." He celebrates the autonomy

[32] John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 71.

and rationality of the (adult male) mind in its ability to reason apart from its "self-imposed nonage." That is, only laziness or cowardice stand in the way of a man's ability to know freely, apart from the constrictions of the Church or government.[33] Autonomy, or self-legislation, was the key ingredient in Kant's understanding of the morally capable man.[34] Like many in his cohort of Enlightenment-era philosophers, Kant linked moral reasoning with moral behavior.[35] Kant described a "tug-of-war" between a man's inclinations ("desires, needs, and motives") and his duty.[36] Practical reason leads a man to determine what his duty is in a given situation, regardless of how he *feels* about his choices or any outside forces or influences, *a priori*.[37]

Women, however, were excluded as agents in Kant's moral universe because of their need for men's protection (autonomy) and because of their inability to choose duty (agency) over their natural inclinations toward beauty (rationality). In his text *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime,* Kant writes,

> Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation! Women is intolerant of all

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[33] Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" trans. Mary C. Smith. Columbia University, accessed July 9, 2021, http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html.

[34] "Kantian autonomy really means obedience to an *internal* authority—not an individual conscience, but a thoroughly impersonal 'agency.' It means submission to the causeless, causally inefficacious, atemporal, inscrutable, and incomprehensible demands of the noumenal [the-thing-in-itself] will" (Robert L. Campbell and John Chambers Christopher, "Moral Development Theory: A Critique of Its Kantian Presuppositions," *Developmental Review* 16, no. 1 [1996]: 6, https://doi.org/10.1006/drev.1996.0001.)

[35] See, for instance, the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

[36] Sally Sedgwick, "Can Kant's Ethic Survive the Feminist Critique?" In *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant,* ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 79.

[37] See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. and ed., Mary Gregor. Introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

> commands and all morose constraint. They do something only because it pleases them, and the art consists in making only that please them which is good. I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles. . . .[38]

Children, too, are excluded from Kant's ethics insofar as they are not fully rational adults. But their exclusion, unlike women, is only temporary. Through "top-down" moral education, boys can overcome their animal-like nature and become rational thinkers.[39] "Everything in education depends upon establishing correct principles, and leading children to understand and accept them," Kant writes in his treatise, *On Education*.[40]

Feminist philosopher Sally Sedgwick asks, "Can Kant's Ethics Survive Feminist Critique?" when relationality is an essential part of a feminist critical lens. Other feminist scholars like Barbara Herman have attempted to bring a Kantian ethical foundation into conversation with feminist ethics. However, as Sedgwick shows, the incompatibility between feminist and Kantian ethics goes deeper than his misrepresentation of women as "intolerant of all commands and all morose constraint." Kantian ethics demands a "severing [of a person's] ties to [her] community and relationships, because these are thought to endanger [her] capacity of self-determination and to interfere with [her] ability to be impartial in the face of competing self-interest."[41] A product of the Enlightenment,

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[38] Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960), 81.

[39] See Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, chapters 1-4.

[40] Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 108.

[41] Sedgwick, 93.

Kantian ethics elevates the autonomous individual without recognizing the ways in which all humans, not just women and children, are interdependent.[42]

Women and children were not the only persons to be excluded from Kant's moral imagination. In his racist writings on anthropology and race, Kant extended his exclusion to Black, Asian, and Native American men as well, "questioning … the natural capacities of non-White races for moral agency and reasoned intellect."[43] In his essays, "On the Different Races of Man" and "Natural Characteristics," Kant categorized the races, naming the white race as having superior morals, intellect, and artistic style over other races. [44] He unambiguously writes, "Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples."[45] While some scholars have deemed Kant's writing on the construction and valuation of race to be "tangential" to his ethical work, others like James Samuel Logan and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze show that Kant's views on race shaped his moral imagination through and through.[46] Even more,

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[42] This individualistic thinking was reflected in early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy as well. She argued that if women are given the same educational opportunities as men, they would be just as rational and autonomous as them. See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women,* ed. Eileen Hunt Botting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[43] James Samuel Logan, "Immanuel Kant on Categorical Imperative," in *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins,* eds. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Miguel A. De La Torre (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox), 75.

[44] See Immanuel Kant, "On the Different Races of Man," and "On Natural Characteristics," in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader,* ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 38-64.

[45] Kant, "Natural Characteristics," 63.

[46] Logan argues that though Kant asks his audience to separate their duty from their inclinations (*a priori),* he himself could not accomplish this. "Even a pure and good will cannot escape this fact, for even to conceive of the a priori, one must dwell in the world of experience" (76).

Logan and Eze, along with Sedgwick above, remind us that claims to universality are not only limited to certain bodies but deeply culturally constructed.

Developing Morality: Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg

Indebted to the Kantian moral imagination came the work of developmental psychologists Erik Erikson (1902-1982), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) and his predecessor Jean Piaget (1896-1980), and their critic feminist Carol Gilligan (1936-).[47] As outlined in chapter 2, developmentalism in the United States was established by the work of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and G. Stanley Hall's theories of human progress and recapitulation, that an individual person grows up in a pattern similar to the growth of a species. Childhood and adolescence played an important role within developmentalism, as age marks where the most significant changes occur. Through the work of Hall and his contemporaries, developmental psychology—and its study of children in particular—became an established and thriving discipline by the interwar period in the U.S.[48] The premier developmental psychologists of the 20th century viewed an individual's lifespan as a series of stages from infancy and adulthood.

The Danish artist-turned-child-analyst Erik Erikson was one of the 20th century's most well-known psychologists.[49] Erikson theorized lifespan development as a series of

[47] For more on the progression between Kantian moral development and developmental psychology, see Campbell and Christopher, "Moral Development Theory: A Critique of Its Kantian Presuppositions" cited above and David E. Leary, "Immanuel Kant and the Development of Modern Psychology," *The Problematic Science: Psychology in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, eds. William Ray Woodward and Mitchell G. Ash (New York: Praeger, 1982), 17-42.

[48] Wade E. Pickren and Alexandra Rutherford, *A History of Modern Psychology in Context* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 157.

[49] Pickren and Rutherford, 157.

stages marked by identity crises or "turning point[s]," characterized by growing autonomy and an increased, individuated sense of self.[50] Like Hall before him, Erikson believed adolescence to be a critical stage in a person's development. Marked by "genital maturation," uncertainty about one's future career, and their place in the teen subculture,[51] adolescence for Erikson was a period in a young person's life in which they forged their sense of self vis-à-vis their peers. He called this the tension between "identity versus identity confusion," which he linked to Freud's psychosexual stages.[52] For Erikson, adolescents are preoccupied with others' opinions and how they fit into the in-group and distinguish themselves from those in the out-groups. They desire peers with whom they can commiserate over their changing bodies and anxiety about their future choices, while also constantly test each other's "loyalties in the midst of inevitable conflicts of values."[53] If adolescents have space for self-expression, apart from their parents and authority figures, they will pass through this stage into the next with "psychosocial strength."[54]

Erikson's eight stages of human development depict only his understanding of Western white male development, despite claiming universal application. Erikson tips his hand in two later chapters in his *Identity: Youth and* Crisis in which he describes the

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[50] Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 96.

[51] It's worth noting that Erikson was writing in the 1960s when there was a thriving teen subculture. Prior to the 1920s, there was not a subculture for middle-class white teens to participate in. See chapter 2.

[52] Erikson, 93.

[53] Erikson, 133.

[54] Erikson, 141.

development of the female child (chapter 7) and the Black child (chapter 8). Carol Gilligan, a student and critic of Erikson's, summarizes his articulation of female adolescence as different from male adolescence. For the teen girl, "She holds her identity in abeyance as she prepares to attract the man by whose name she will be known, by whose status she will be defined, the man who will rescue her from emptiness by filling 'the inner space.'"[55] That "inner space" is both metaphorical and physiological for a girl, representing her need for relationship (unlike male autonomy) and her vaginal cavity or uterus. Erikson writes that

> Emptiness is the female form of perdition . . . but standard experience for all women. To be left, for her, means to be left empty, to be drained of the blood of the body, the warmth of the heart, the sap of life. How a woman thus can be hurt in depth is a wonder to many a man, and it can arouse both his empathic horror and his refusal to understand. Such hurt can be re-experienced in each menstruation; it is a crying to heaven in the mourning over a child; and it becomes a permanent scar in the menopause.[56]

Erikson draws, of course, from Freud here, suggesting that from babyhood, a girl is traumatized from having been born without a penis.[57]

As for his attentiveness to racial difference, to his credit, Erikson recognized the impact of social and historical traumas on Black folks in the U.S. as he was writing in the late 1960s. He suggested that because of the impact of slavery and colonization on African Americans, "they had constrained . . . identity options."[58] The Black individual

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[55] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 12

[56] Erikson, 278.

[57] Erikson, 274-275.

[58] Moin Syed and Jillian Fish, "Revisiting Erik Erikson's Legacy on Culture, Race, and Ethnicity," *Identity* 18, no. 4. (October 2018) 5, 10.1080/15283488.2018.1523729.

(read: boy) had to interpret his identity in the midst of negative images of himself and thus retain not a "positive identity" but a negative one, or "an identity based on opposition to mainstream social forces."[59] For example, he refers to stereotypes and caricatures of Black men as childlike and "superficial[ly] submissive."[60] Yet, Erikson writes of a collective demand for identity apart from dominant white culture. Erikson sees W. E. B. Du Bois's "inaudible Negro" and Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" as "supremely active and powerful demand[s] to be heard and seen, recognized and faced as *individuals with a choice* rather than as men marked by what is all too superficially visible, namely, their color."[61] These chapters on female and African-American human development show Erikson's commitment to not taking "a life out of history, that life-story and history, psychology and politics, are deeply entwined."[62] Yet, by placing girls and Black boys outside of his normative model for child development, Erikson tempts us into placing non-white non-boys into a category of deviance. Difference, here, suggests inferiority.[63]

While Erikson focused on childhood psychosocial development, Lawrence Kohlberg created a model for child moral development, borne out of the work of Jean Piaget. Briefly, in his study of middle-class French boys, Piaget noticed that children had similar patterns of thinking at similar ages.[64] Preadolescents and adolescents fit into his

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[59] Syed and Fish, 5. See Erikson, 302.

[60] Erikson, 303-304.

[61] Erikson, 299.

[62] Gilligan, xi.

[63] Gilligan, xvii.

[64] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 80. Pickren and Rutherford, 191.

Formal Operational Stage, where a young person begins to think abstractly and hypothetically and is able to conceptualize a future.[65] Piaget believed these stages developed biologically "in interaction with the child's practical experiences in the world."[66] Important to Piaget's stages of development was a child's growing autonomy, or sense of freedom from his subjection to another's authority ("heteronomy").[67]

Kohlberg expanded Piaget's work to look not just at cognitive development but moral development in children and adults. Kohlberg identified three levels and six total stages of moral development that one must pass through chronologically: the stage of punishment and obedience; the stage of individual instrumental purpose and exchange; the stage of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity; the sage of social system and conscious maintenance; the stage of prior rights and social contract or utility; and the stage of universal ethical principles.[68] Ultimately, Kohlberg concluded that moral reasoning—as a reflection of autonomous thinking—was a key to moral maturity. And the specifics of those reasons mattered tremendously: doing the right thing as a means to avoid punishment (stage 1) involves much less moral maturity than doing the right thing because it is lawful to do so (stage 4) or because it reflects one's abstract and universal values (stage 6).

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[65] Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 207.

[66] Pickren and Rutherford, 315.

[67] Ronald Duska and Mariellen Whelan, *Moral Development: A Guide to Piaget and Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 8.

[68] Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice.* Essays on Moral Development Volume I. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 409-412.

Like Erikson's six psychosocial developmental stages, Kohlberg suggested that his six stages were universal across gender and culture and that this was the only path for young people to develop morally: toward "fully autonomous rationality." Wall wonders if perhaps Kohlberg was "telling the wrong story" by "marginalizing the moral experiences of women or infantilizing cultures that value the well-being of the group." [69] This is the position Gilligan takes as a student of Kohlberg's as well as Erikson's. Gilligan points out that those who did not belong to his original study of 84 white boys curiously did not reach the higher stages of moral development. Indeed, "Women appear deficient in moral development when measured by Kohlberg's scale."[70] Girls' behaviors suggest that they value relationships over rightness, intuition over "the primacy and universality of individual rights," thus unable to reach the higher levels of moral development.[71] Gilligan suggests, as a remedy, the careful listening to girls' and women's voices. By placing the female voice and experience at the center of study, she challenges the assumptions of developmental psychologists like Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg that "people are by nature separate, independent from one another, and self-governing."[72]

The Childhood Studies Response

While Gilligan offers an important counter to the androcentrism of developmental psychology, ultimately her feminist reinterpretation suffers the same pitfalls of those she aims to critique. That is, ". . . stageism excludes the full experiences of children. . . . It

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[69] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 80.

[70] Gilligan, 18.

[71] Gilligan, 21.

[72] Gilligan, xiv.

sees human time from a cartesian perspective as simply passing by, rather than as part of a narrative world that human beings also activity construct."[73] There is a logic to developmentalism that assumes a linear teleology from babyhood to adulthood that does not account for a person's difference or agency, nor does it consider a child's particular stage in life as morally good beyond looking toward the next stage.[74] This critique is progressed most thoroughly in the field of childhood studies, which responded to the hegemony of developmentalist theories in the mid-to-late 20th century.[75]

Childhood studies, or the "new sociology of childhood," formed as an academic discipline in the 1980s with the purpose of studying "children and youth beyond the (then and still) dominant paradigm of developmental psychology." Rather than studying the patterns of children over a lifespan, childhood studies places the agential child at the center of its research; children actively participate alongside the adults who study them, even changing the nature of research in the process.[76] In privileging children and their phenomenological experiences, childhood studies scholars recognize how young people are both formed by their cultures and social networks and are also "active participants in

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[73] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 81.

Cartesian, or from the Descartes revolution, where time unfolds in a linear trajectory: "Time is the duration of things which exist 'successively,' i.e. with the parts of their existence arranged 'before and after.' For example, a human life is temporal because adolescence is before adulthood and after infancy" (Geoffrey Gorham, "Descartes on God's Relation to Time," *Religious Studies* 44, no. 1 [2008]: 415, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27749975). Wall offers a view of childhood that invites children to participate in constructing a moral imagination, but not solely for the purpose of "succeeding" to another stage of development.

[74] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 29.

[75] Spyros Spyrou, Rachel Rosen, and Daniel Thomas Cook, "Introduction: Reimagining Childhood Studies: Connectivities … Relationalities … Linkages," in *Reimagining Childhood Studies,* eds. Spyros Spyrou, Rachel Rosen, and Daniel Thomas Cook (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 2.

[76] Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism," 2.

and interpreters of these environments in their own right."[77] In this is the recognition of a multiplicity of childhoods and children who are not measured against the same narrow rubric as bourgeois white boys.[78]

One of the primary mottos of childhood studies is "being not becoming."[79] That is, children are not just on their way to becoming mature adults—through moral reasoning (Kohlberg) or self-identity (Erikson)—but by merely being in the world. By focusing on who youth are to *become*, we miss the unique ways children already *are*: creative, vulnerable, moral, curious, and clever. Childhood studies pushes us to consider the ways in which children are agents in their world, even at a young age, creating and interpreting the world around them.

Scholars Spyros Spyrou et al. and Wall caution against the extremes of these two key tenets of childhood studies: the being of childhood and the agential child. Spyrou et al. question whether childhood studies' refusal to recognize *becoming* over or alongside *being* might hinder the field from recognizing the complexities of childhood subjectivity and agency. While it is important to recognize that children are not "*merely* in the process of undergoing change," it is not helpful to replace this child with "a kind of denaturalized child which exists in a here-and-now. . . ."[80]As for agency, childhood studies, in its

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[77] Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism," 8.

[78] Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism," 2.

[79] Spyrou, et al, 2.

Gabrielle Owen, in her *Queer History of Adolescence,* argues something similar when she says "adolescence is not a preparation for life, as if such preparation were even possible, as if there were a stage before *life.* Adolescence *is* life" (131).

[80] Spyrou, et al., 4.

insistence—rightly—on recognizing the agential child often does so "to the point of a fetish." That is, for Spyrou et al., ". . . the thrust of approach and conception [of childhood studies] continues to favor singular—if socially, culturally, and historically embedded—subjects who display, or must be allowed to display, creativity and active engagement of the world in the here and now."[81] For Wall, an overemphasis on agency eclipses the ways in which children are uniquely vulnerable, due to their relative size and experience in the world.[82]

The two prevailing Western views on childhood and adolescent subjectivities and agencies—the Kantian and developmental schools of thought—understand children and youth through narrow lenses. For Kant, children (along with women and men of color) are "unformed" or imperfect humans.[83] Children cannot make rational choices for themselves because of their "nonage" or reliance on others to think and act on their behalf. In Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg, too, children are defined by "what they lack" and are moving toward: from a bond of trust with one's primary caregiver to an individuated sense of self (Erikson), from following social conventions to thinking for oneself (Kohlberg). Those who do not follow these trajectories toward adulthood—marked by "separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights"—are deemed deviant or, as in the case of Gilligan, in need of alternative developmental models.[84] Within these developmental models, there is little consideration of a child's agency as he

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[81] Spyrou, et al., 3.

[82] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 24.

[83] Wall, 80.

[84] Quote from Gilligan, 23.

is swept from one stage or level to the next. In response, childhood studies rejects developmentalism for not considering the individual agencies and personhoods of the children these above psychologists have studied. But in this focus on being over becoming, agency over passivity, childhood studies scholars risk fetishizing children and ignoring their complex vulnerabilities and interdependency. All of these thinkers, including Gilligan, place emphasis on the individual self to either passively or actively grow physiologically or morally toward adult maturity.

ADOLESCENT SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY

"A child's sexuality, like all sexuality, is situated at the intersection of culture, the body and individual biography—as something that is shaped by the social and open to refutation and resistance," write R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes.[85] A young person's sexuality is neither solely a product of one's biological determinism (nature) nor the culture they inhabit (nurture) but is made up of a combination of their biology, their family systems, their nationality and ethnicity, gender, class, race, (dis)ability, religion, and so on. A young person may find their sexualities align with the worlds they were shaped in and by, or they might find their sexuality to be in direct opposition to those worlds.[86]

Sociologists Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott compare a child's cultural understanding of sex and sexuality (or "sexual scripts") to a jigsaw puzzle. A child may have two or three pieces—she knows that adults kiss and sometimes get married; she knows that she

[85] R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2010), 153.

[86] Egan and Hawkes, 155.

must sit with her knees together when she's wearing a sundress; and she knows that the adults at church comment on her curly hair but not her drawing skills. But she does not have all the puzzle pieces, nor does she always know how the pieces fit together or even if they "belong to the same puzzle."[87] Barbara Blodgett suggests two possible lessons for a girl with the jigsaw puzzle through what she calls "moral maps."[88] The first comes from whom Blodgett calls feminist theologians of the erotic. They tell the girl that the puzzle pieces always come together to form a beautiful picture—and if they do not, then she has the wrong puzzle. She just needs to tap into her God-given intuition and creativity to discover the pieces laid out for her and how they fit together. That is, eros—or the divine power of the erotic—is always good and therefore any experience of sexuality that is not good is not truly erotic. This lesson does not help the girl understand the sexual script, nor does it take into account the realities of heteropatriarchal oppression that she cannot easily escape.

The second lesson comes from Blodgett in her reading of feminist psychoanalysts; this lesson is very different. This lesson states that there are two puzzles that have gotten mixed together. One puzzle shows a beautiful picture of romance and love; the other shows a harrowing picture of disavowing the erotic and of unequal power dynamics. With this lesson, the girl needs help discerning how to separate out the puzzle pieces and how to interpret the image each puzzle creates. She needs help locating the often-missing puzzle pieces of "those relating to desire, pleasure and physical sexual

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[87] Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "A Sociological History of Researching Childhood and Sexuality: Continuities and Discontinuities," in *Children, Sexuality, and Sexualization,* eds. Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and R. Danielle Egan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 43.

[88] Barbara Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic: Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 8.

acts," write Jackson and Scott,[89] as well as the pieces that make sense of "the dynamics of gender, power, and culture, which are not easily teased apart."[90] And yet, one might ask, as feminist Elizabeth Gish does, whether this second lesson unfairly insists that the girl cannot solve the puzzle on her own. Rather than giving girls the "resources and space to better interpret" the puzzle pieces, Blodgett suggests that "this is the job of adults such as herself."[91]

We can imagine, too, how a queer child of any gender might engage with the puzzle and internalize the lessons they receive. A queer child might find themselves confused why the puzzle they are solving is not coming together the way they are told it should. The puzzle may appear to be that beautiful picture promised in Lesson One, but it is only a façade—a stock photo, not a masterpiece. Or maybe the queer child tries to steal a piece from another puzzle with the hopes that it will fit into their own jigsaw. The mixing of puzzle pieces, this time, is intentional; although Lesson Two might be the same as it is with girls: an adult must step in to help the queer child tease out what is truly part of their puzzle and what is not.[92]

These two lessons represent prevailing views of children's and adolescents' sexual subjectivity and agency, which, similar to the prevailing Western views on moral

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[89] Jackson and Scott, 43.

[90] Blodgett, 8.

[91] Elizabeth Gish, "'Are You a "Trashable" Styrofoam Cup?': Harm and Damage Rhetoric in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 19, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.2.03.

[92] This is similar to how Susan Talburt writes about the construction of queer narratives as intelligible: that the queer child must transition from tragically in the closet and confused to happily out of the closet and confident (Susan Talburt, "Intelligibility and Narrating Queer Youth," in *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination in and out of Schools*, eds. Mary Louise Rasmussen, Eric Rofes, and Susan Talburt [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004], 17-39).

subjectivity and agency, render youth as either completely agential—to the point of transcending their vulnerabilities—or wholly vulnerable, passive, and in need of adult protection and guidance. They also erase the racial, socioeconomic, and ethnic differences with which a child may engage with their puzzle pieces. Much like how the Kantian and developmental models pulled all children under the same rubric of the white male child, these lessons assume young people, especially young girls, to be a homogenous group.

The two lessons are reflected within dominant Protestant Christianity as well, especially as Christianity (and evangelicalism specifically) assimilates to and borrows from Western philosophical thought. In Lesson One, theologians of the erotic, like many second-wave Christian feminists, challenge a Christian history of hating women's bodies and situating sexuality only within the context of heterosexual marriage. Lesson One subverts the patriarchy by insisting that women and girls do have the erotic power to choose what is best for their bodies, apart from male dominance.[93] With Lesson Two, Blodgett counters with a view of adolescent girls that centers their vulnerabilities, particularly the way they disavow their desires in relationships with others. Writing from a Christian theoethical perspective in which "sin, sexuality, and the human capacity to create meaning are deeply entwined," Blodgett invites adolescents (teen girls specifically) into the adult male world of theological participation.[94] Yet, Blodgett does not trust adolescents to navigate that world without adult supervision.

[93] Blodgett, 186.

[94] Blodgett, 189.

Perhaps it is not that children lack the reasoning to solve the puzzle, nor that they are only on their way to understanding or need adult supervision, but given the right "resources and space," they can interpret the puzzle on their own.[95] That is, through social structures that promote a child's self-determination and through reflective relational experiences, a young person can make sense of sexual scripts in a way that does not demand a particular interpretation but invites her participation.[96] This task requires that we have a more complex understanding of child and adolescent ways-of-being that are not beholden to adult concepts of subjectivity and agency. I argue for understanding youth ways-of-being through a queer, feminist, and critically child-centric lens that resists the normative assumptions of the child as developing toward adulthood and unidirectionally dependent on adults.

Queer Subjectivities

Predominant and prevailing Western views of child/youth subjectivity (as unformed or becoming) presume an intelligible childhood. A child grows up toward adult maturity; from asexual to sexual; from deviant to normative. In a 1969 *Ladies' Home Journal* article, for example, a Ph.D. named Dr. Kirkendall tells parents how they should speak to their teens about sex to help "their children grow up to be warm, loving, responsive persons who can give and receive in a responsible love and sexual

[95] Gish, 19.

[96] For liberative Christian sexual ethic, see, for example, Marvin Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012). Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996). Kate Ott, "Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics: A Social Justice Obligation to Adolescent Sexual Health," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7, no. 2 (2007). Cristina L. H. Traina, *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

relationship," as if they are not already loving, responsive persons.[97] Real children resist these pat categories and directions. When it comes to the "shape" of child and youth sexuality, "it cannot be known, defined, or supposed in advance," write Egan and Hawkes. Child and adolescent sexual subjectivities are not intelligible; they require adults to "get more comfortable with ambiguity."[98]

This does not mean that children and youth fit into the category of the abstract deviant other. Children resist all stable knowledge.[99] As queer theorists have argued, childhood (and with it, adolescence) is queer. "For no matter how you slice it," writes Kathryn Bond Stockton, "the child from the standpoint of 'normal' adults is always queer."[100] Childhood and adolescence challenge and "frustrate the adult-centric, neo-liberal, white, heteropatriarchal construction of sexuality," write Kate Ott and myself.[101] Children do not grow *up* to normative adulthood, as they are thought or expected to, but grow sideways and out, or what Wall would call "narrative expansion."[102]

For example, imagine a seven-year-old girl who cuts and styles her hair after a Backstreet Boy, begs for the "boy toy" in her McDonald's Happy Meal, utters the phrase "I wish I were a boy" in the mirror—yet cries, embarrassed, when she's asked, "Are you

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[97] Lester A. Kirkendall, "Telling Teen-Agers About Sex: 6 Simple Rules for Parents." *Ladies' Home Journal* 86, no. 8 (August 1969): 52, https://www.proquest.com/magazines/telling-teen-agers-about-sex-6-simple-rules/docview/1922395013/se-2?accountid=196683.

[98] Egan and Hawkes, 155.

[99] Susanne Luhmann cited in Talburt, 35.

[100] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 7.

[101] Ott and Sawyer, 264-265.

[102] Stockton, 11. Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 29.

a boy?" at recess. The first half of the child's experience presumes a trajectory—though itself queer—toward gender dysmorphia. Yet, the child's actual behaviors do not so neatly align themselves to this teleology; the child is upset that she is called a boy, despite wanting to be a boy. She resists, though not intentionally, any "normal" gender development. From Hannah Dyer's work on the queer aesthetics of childhood, this child's experience is an example of queer affect or what is "excess of the socio-symbolic order and arrive to us 'as surprise or interruption, . . . suspending knowable or teleological time and unhing[ing] proper boundaries and habitual social relationalities.'"[103] We are surprised, as the child is, that she is upset by how her gender is perceived on the playground. Because queer affects "must be discarded in order to 'grow up,'"[104] the surprise the child experiences at recess must be collapsed into a "normal" adult's intelligible articulation of childhood: "It was then I knew I wanted to stay a girl."[105]

Unlike this collapsing of a child's complex experience of herself in her gender, Wall writes of narrative expansion as the "ethical aim" of childhood: that "life's complex narratives may achieve an increasingly diverse wholeness. All the many, various, and conflicting parts of one's life story—its multiple pasts, futures, and presents as a self with others—may be invested with a more rather than less narrative unity."[106] This unity

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[103] Dina Georgis quoted in Hannah Dyer, *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 7.

[104] Dyer, 7.

[105] See Stockton, 6-7.

[106] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 59-60.

allows for the child's queerness to remain intact, intensify even, as she develops in other ways: in relationships with others, in her self-expression, and in her understanding of the world and her place in it. Thus, I offer here a view of youth subjectivity as *becoming* (growing sideways) but without a normative teleology, a *being* but not a static/stable kind of being.

Interdependent Autonomy

As complex subjects, children participate in their moral universes not as parrots of adult behavior nor with the same moral responsibility/culpability as adults. Not rational, autonomous agents, children are *interdependently autonomous*.[107] Children need adults to survive and to grow toward greater moral understanding, but adults also need children to disrupt them and help them decenter themselves toward greater moral responsibility.[108] Children "disrupt in the moral sense of demanding changes in the world." When a child is born, parents shift their schedules, change their spending habits, reallocate rooms in their home. Communities make space for another child in daycare; a child's name is added to a household census form. And with every new child comes new moral questions: should the child (and her community) have access to lead-free water? Should the child (and his guardians) have choice in what school he attends? [109]

Children, too, are disrupted by others and thus have a role in moral world-building. "Even the youngest child is obliged to exceed herself in response to others, to create new relations beyond her present horizons, to expand her own moral worlds,"

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[107] Language of "interdependent autonomy" is from Spyrou, 7.

[108] See Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 88.

[109] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 90.

writes Wall. "This possibility does not suddenly materialize at some 'age of reason,' but grows throughout life's increasing social experiences."[110] Wall gives the example of a newborn and her relation to destitute peoples in the world. Baby Ellie relates to the poor, "for example through the cheap labor that went into making her toys," but her relation to them is limited. Ellie cannot make sense of her relation to the poor due to her lack of narrative experience (i.e., her lack cognitive abilities in understanding where toys come from, beyond her toy bin). But as she grows in narrative complexity, she will have a growing sense of how her worlds intersect with others' and a growing response-ability to the poor.[111]

Similarly, Nomy Arpaly writes of the difference between a child's having and giving reasons.[112] Three-year-old Teddy asks his playmate if he needs help putting his toy together. Teddy does a kind thing, and likely knows it is a kind thing, but when pressed, he is unable to articulate *why* it is a kind thing. He is participating in his moral universe, even as a young child, whether he can articulate his moral reasoning or not. This is directly counter to Kantian and Kohlbergian notions of autonomy, which narrowly define moral reasoning as "increasingly independent and sophisticated reason-giving" that exists only in adulthood (Kant) or develops over a person's lifetime (Kohlberg).[113] Feminist social ethicist Cristina L. H. Traina writes that "the inability of a child to explain [his] actions fully," such as Teddy offering help to his classmate, "does not necessarily make

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[110] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 108.

[111] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood,* 79, 48.

[112] Cited in Cristina L. H. Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics,* 29, no. 2 (2009): 23.

[113] Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," 22.

[his] behavior less morally weighty, less intentional, or less rational." Indeed, even if Teddy understands that offering a helping hand is a kind thing to do, that does not guarantee that he will do that kind deed again.[114]

In emphasizing the importance of children's moral agency, Traina draws on the work of Black feminist and womanist scholars who emphasize the importance for Black women in recognizing their agency, and dignity, in the midst of oppression.[115] This does not erase Black women's vulnerability but reminds them "that they have not borne their mistreatment passively."[116] These scholars resist the easy narrative that a victim is, and must always be, passive against perpetration to risk being deemed complicit.[117] Rather, Traina argues that even young children are complicit—as in, active participants in—their abuse, but that does not make them responsible or culpable for the acts of violence done to them. For an example, a child may acquiesce to her father's abuse in order to ensure she and her siblings are fed that night. This does not make the beatings she receives her fault; rather, it shows her creative participation in her broken family system toward what she understands to be a greater moral good (provisions for her and her siblings). Lisa Tessman calls this "burdened virtues": sometimes the morally right thing to do (acquiesce) would not be viewed as morally good under perfect circumstances. It is not the child's fault that "someone 'set up the world up like this.'" Traina continues, "For

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[114] Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," 23.

[115] Traina is careful not to conflate the experiences of a young white child with those of a Black girl or woman.

[116] Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," 25.

[117] See also Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

children, who manifestly 'do not set the world up,' Tessman's burdened virtues provides a realistic way to think about moral action and about how systemic evil bears down to shape children's moral formation."[118] Children retain their moral agency but ought not be held responsible (especially legally so) for their actions to the same degree as adults.

As children like Ellie and Teddy reach adolescence, their moral worlds expand toward greater participation and greater response-ability. Ellie may learn that not just her toys, but her clothes, come from cheap labor overseas. Out of this, she may choose to wear only vintage, secondhand clothing (much to her peer group's dismay) as an expression of her moral agency. Her articulation of *why* she is wearing these thrift-store clothes could be viewed as simplistic to adult sensibilities ("Child labor is wrong!"), but her reasoning reflects her self as a moral subject. For Teddy, his kindness in daycare might extend to his relationships in adolescence. He may find that his kindness functions in a particular way because of his brown skin. That is, the children, now teens, may have a greater recognition that how the world is "set up" is even more constraining due to their race (Teddy as Indian American) and gender (Ellie as female). Teddy may feel extra pressure to be viewed as the "kind one" among his white peers and teachers to fulfill his predetermined role as the "model minority." Ellie may feel pressure to look and dress a certain way that collides with her convictions about child labor.

Adolescent Sexuality, or Orgasmic Failure

With these complex and dynamic understandings of adolescent subjectivities and agency, we have a broader conceptual framework for adolescent sex and sexuality that

[118] Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," 27.

moves beyond risk. As queer subjects, adolescents participate in their moral and social worlds in ways that do not always make rational "adult" sense. For instance, adolescents today prefer maintaining relationships through texting and sexting more so than hanging out at the mall or going on dates as did previous generations of teens.[119] As interdependently autonomous agents, adolescents disrupt adult assumptions that sex must lead to the "success" of procreation or orgasm. Returning to the language of "orgasmic failure" introduced at the beginning of this chapter, adolescent sexuality, with its inclusion in the larger narrative of human sexuality, "resist[s] a goal of self-mastery of sexual behaviors . . . embrace[s] a praxis-based approach that values experiential knowledge and unhinges 'teaching' from particular centers of power . . . [and] release[s] ourselves and our relationships from a linear developmental logic that views change or ending as a loss."[120] That is, adolescent sexuality is (1) not caught up with the outcome of a particular sexual behavior, as other motivations such as pleasure and curiosity are centered in a teen's experience, (2) learning is done by doing and through peer-to-peer interaction, especially as adults fail to offer holistic sexuality education, and (3) relationships themselves do not need to be lifelong to be significant (meaning, childhood loves are as "serious" as adult relationships). Therefore, orgasmic failure is descriptive rather than prescriptive, except in how it directs adults to have a more expansive view of sexuality. I will return to this queer understanding of adolescent subjectivity and agency in the next chapter in my engagement with memoir and personal narrative.

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[119] See Jean Twenge cited in Owen, 155. See also Amy Adele Hasinoff, *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalization, Privacy, and Consent* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

[120] Ott, "Orgasmic Failure," 111.

CONCLUSION

In 2009, the off-Broadway production of *Spring Awakening* made its way to Midwest stages. I was 18 years old when I sat in the back of a Cleveland theater, watching the story of adolescent sexual desire and confusion alongside my friend and her high-school-aged brother. I remember blushing when the boys mimicked masturbating on stage. I felt sick to my stomach (and, admittedly, intrigued) when Melchior exposed Wendla's breast to the audience. I drove back to my evangelical college on the Sunday of spring break, feeling things in my body that I had not been invited to feel in my Christian context: desire, curiosity, *thirst*. I became obsessed with *Spring Awakening*, a story I had known nothing about until I saw it on stage; I wrote about it in my school newspaper:

> The musical follows a group of 19th century teenagers who begin to question the moral standards they have always followed. They slowly deviate from their parents' teachings and begin exploring sexuality. Instead of giving guidance to the teenagers, the adults write more rules. The teens end up confused, finding comfort in each other or in the escape of death.
>
> . . . A musical exploring the themes of teen pregnancy, suicide and abortion doesn't seem [appropriate for students at an evangelical college]. But the Tony Award-winning musical "Spring Awakening" allows [college] students to grapple with these themes from a Christian perspective.[121]

This was my story—not that of "teen pregnancy, suicide, and abortion" but of trying "to grapple with these themes from a Christian perspective." Adult failures, I knew well. I was not yet aware of how little I knew about sex, but I had a queer felt sense that I was being duped. *Maybe sex isn't* always *bad outside of hetero marriage. Maybe it's normal for girls to want to have sex, too.* I did not have the resources within my evangelical Christian context to make sense of my questions or my awakened/ing sexual feelings

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[121] Lauren Sawyer, "Spring Awakening," *The Sojourn,* Indiana Wesleyan University, March 26, 2009.

either. So, I set out to understand it on my own, by writing about *Spring Awakening* in the school newspaper and listening to the soundtrack on loop.

I began this chapter with a brief reading of *Spring Awakening*, a story that sets in motion many of the themes explored in this chapter. I first examined Western conceptions of child and adolescent subjectivities and agency, especially regarding sex and sexuality. I showed how from the Enlightenment era on, children, women, and people of color have been excluded from normative models of moral development and therefore appear to be morally deficient. More than just including different voices in the established rubric, I took Wall's lead and challenged the rubrics—subjectivity and agency—themselves. From a liberative queer, feminist, and childist lens, I brought these conceptual reimaginings into the realm of sex and sexuality and presented a descriptive understanding of adolescent sexuality or "orgasmic failure." I will carry this on into chapter 4, where we are invited into the lived experiences of adolescents as they navigate their complex subjectivities and agencies within the oppressive socio-theological world of white evangelical purity culture. Chapter 4 demands that we put on that critical queer, feminist, and childist lens in order to read teens' experiences not only as stories of pain and vulnerability but also, simultaneously, stories of agency and resistance.

CHAPTER FOUR

"HALF-KISSES" AND "INDISCRIMINATE HAND JOBS": NARRATIVES OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL AGENCY

Growing up a preacher's kid in Chicagoland, Danny subscribed to Focus on the Family's Christian alternative to *CosmoGirl, Brio.* Every issue featured a "Brio girl," a reader who "embodied" the ideal "qualities of Brio," or what Danny describes in a 2021 humor piece as "homeworkfulness, tidyment, toothbrushery, boyfriend control, projects, social studies, haircut-mindedness, eyes on the prize, gel pens for devotional journals, Bible For Teen Girls, limited field hockey, one hour on the family computer, being on time, dishwasher awareness, college prep. . . . My bitterest regret," Danny writes, "is that I was never selected as a Brio girl." Danny imagines how great a Brio girl he would make—he, a trans man, now in his thirties:

> That's a whole career right there, repackaging evangelical Christianity for religiously-minded queers. I'd make a killing on devotional companions to [hormone replacement therapy] with folksy little asides about dealing with acne and avoiding pornography if T changes your libido.[1]

He cites relevant Bible verses corresponding to each week on testosterone.

Danny writes extensively about his growing up evangelical, and transitioning later in life, in his collection of essays, *Something that May Shock and Discredit You.* He uses the narratives, scripture, and themes of his childhood and adolescent faith to "ground and

[1] Daniel Lavery, "Brio Magazine-Related Branding Opportunities I've Missed," *The Chatner*, March 2, 2021, accessed August 15, 2021, https://www.thechatner.com/p/brio-magazine-related-branding-opportunities.

locate [himself] in the stories of transformation that were already familiar to [him]."[2] Jacob wrestling the angel and being given a new name. The rapture and Second Coming. The flood in Genesis 6-9. "Nebuchadnezzar scrabbling in the fields among the beasts."[3] Evangelicalism helps him interpret the contours of his childhood—the feelings, the questions, the confusion—as well as his gender transition in his early 30s, but it does not provide any narrative cohesion. He writes,

> My childhood was not especially useful to my adulthood, which I found bitterly disappointing. . . . One thing that came as a relief to me was the realization that absent any sort of narrative about biological destiny or the magic of chromosomes, everyone's description of their internal sense of gender, their own sense of themselves as male or female or anything else, always sounded a little ridiculous, always depended on shorthand and substitution. Any attempts to justify or ground said feelings in externalities inevitably resulted in a sort of half-hearted list of hobbies, interests, toy preferences, instinctive reactions to certain forms of dress or speech or address.[4]

Danny is frustrated, then delighted, that there is not a clear trajectory from girlhood hobbies (climbing trees, and so on) to his transition. Rather, what he has are "[a]ll the many, various, and conflicting parts of [his] life story—its multiple pasts, futures, and presents as a self with others," as John Wall writes.[5] In his essays, Danny does not shape his life story as one of Christian to agnostic, or evangelical to exvangelical; nor is it shaped as girl to man, or as unhappy closeted childhood to happy uncloseted adulthood.[6]

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[2] Daniel Mallory Ortberg [Lavery], *Something that May Shock and Discredit You* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 53. eBook.

[3] [Lavery], *Something that May Shock and Discredit You*, 48.

[4] [Lavery], *Something that May Shock and Discredit You*, 48.

[5] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 59-60.

[6] See Susan Talburt, "Intelligibility and Narrating Queer Youth," in *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination in and out of Schools*, eds. Mary Louise Rasmussen, Eric Rofes, and Susan Talburt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 17-39, also cited below.

This collection lacks the cohesion that is typical of so many stories of both coming out and leaving a faith. Rather, Danny provides this image of complicated, complex narrative integration—a growing sense of how his faith and queerness connect and expand his sense of self.[7]

This chapter attempts something of the complex narrative integration of Danny's essay collection. It centers, reads, and analyzes the experiences of adolescents in contemporary evangelical purity culture—by way of personal narrative—while resisting an interpretive structure in which adults (in this case, their adult selves) moralize those experiences.[8] That is, I attempt to take young people's experiences at face value, within

[7] I stray from Wall's language of "narrative wholeness" and instead borrow from Elyse Ambrose's term of integration. Ambrose writes that "[e]mbodying integration reflects a counter way of being which centers wholeness through healing from disintegration. In pursuit of healing and wholeness, sexual integration resists disintegrative effects on the self and within society present namely through systems of heterosexism, sexism, genderism, classism, and racism. Fluidity in expression (including sexual and gender), rather than hegemonic rigidity, is embraced rather than curtailed. A thoroughly embodied integrative praxis is inevitably fluid, as the self is ever-evolving" (Elyse Ambrose, "Integrative Communality as Liberative Praxis of Christian Sexual Ethics: A Black Queer Ethic," Ph.D. diss, [Drew University, 2019], 5-6). Though Ambrose here is building specifically a Black queer Christian sexual ethic, her image of integration is helpful here, as it implies the reality of disintegration through social harms like heterosexism and sexism, most central to this chapter. And integration provides space for queer failure, imperfection, thus resisting adultist and white supremacist values.

[8] For this chapter, I narrow the scope of my reading to memoirs and personal narratives from straight women and queer folks of all genders who were born between approximately 1980 and 1990 and participated in the evangelical subculture during their adolescence. This excluded some important memoirs by those in fundamentalist cults. I felt that their particular experiences were not representative of most evangelical adolescents. All of the personal narratives were written by people who identify as white, do not mention their race in their account, or their experiences in purity culture are normative for white adolescents. For example, Carmen Maria Machado is the daughter of Cuban immigrants, yet her race and ethnicity are not named in her personal essay, "A Girl's Guide to Sexual Purity" (Carmen Maria Machado, "A Girl's Guide to Sexual Purity," in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*, eds. Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal [Indianapolis, IN: Epiphany Publishing, 2019], 39-55).

Very few of the authors made mention of their race or assigned it any meaning, with an important exception of Klein's collection of narratives in her journalistic memoir *Pure.* Klein names in her methods section that she interviewed those "who grew up in the evangelical purity movement rang[ing] in age from their early twenties to their early forties" (292). At the time of publication in 2018, Klein's interviewees would have just included folks born mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. Klein provides a nascent analysis of whiteness in purity culture, particularly in her chapter on the No Shame Movement, a post-evangelical online community started by a Black woman, Laura Polk ("About," No Shame Movement, accessed

their cultural context, time, and place, and resist an adultist lens that views adolescents as unformed subjects or merely "on their way" to adulthood. I build from the framework of adolescent sexual agency and subjectivity presented in chapter 3 of this dissertation by drawing attention to the ways young people are shaped by the dominant culture in which they are embedded yet also stand against that culture as queer subjects and interdependent moral agents. But because attention to race is conspicuously missing from these young people's narratives, I draw attention to its absence, adding where I can necessary commentary. Like with Danny: even in his complex story-building, he does not engage how his evangelical girlhood was shaped by whiteness: that the expectations placed on him as a (failed) future woman reflect the pure, domestic, and submissiveness of the white ideal of womanhood.[9]

AGENCY, INTELLIGIBILITY AND NARRATIVE: ANALYZING YOUTH CHOICES

This chapter gives adolescent girls and queer youth epistemological privilege by centering their experiences within purity culture.[10] The valuing of personal experience,

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September 24, 2021, noshamemovement.tumblr.com). Klein notes that purity culture has been "exported" to African countries through missionaries and colonialism (260).

We know from the work of Black scholars Monique Moultrie and Tamura Lomax that conservative sexual ethics endure in Black and other non-white communities and, indeed, reflect many of the white normative values of contemporary evangelical purity culture. And yet, as these values have been exported to and imposed upon non-white communities, they take a different shape. See Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious, Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[9] See Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 113.

[10] See Melissa Browning, "Epistemological Privilege and Collaborative Research: A Reflection on Researching as an Outsider," *Practical Matters* 6 (Spring 2013): 1-16.

especially women's experience, is characteristically feminist, as it challenges the Western, male-centric assumption of objectivity.[11] Mary Fulkerson and other feminist scholars have argued that there is no "view from nowhere," as "[a]ll knowing is embodied knowing."[12] Therefore, the experiences of adolescent girls and queer youth are valid sources of knowledge, no less than adults' experiences or classic sources of knowledge like texts and tradition. Their experiences are studied "*in the plural*," for no single experience is representative of all girls or all adolescents.[13] Those experiences—unique, complex, conflicting—can provide "moral insight." [14] In this chapter, focusing on first-hand accounts of lived experience uncovers the moral choices teenagers make in light of conservative sexual norms, or the "master narrative" of purity culture.[15]

Narrative is one way to crystalize lived experience into observable data.[16] Narrative is both interpreted by its readers and is self-interpreted by the author herself

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[11] Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism & Method* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 6-7.

[12] Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum Books), 67.

[13] Harding, 7.

[14] Margaret A. Farley, "The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects,* ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 135.

[15] In the field of psychology, master narratives are "templates for the kinds of experiences one should be having, and how to interpret them—that is, templates for a culturally normative, valued biography. . . . [A]s individuals negotiate with these narratives in developing their own identities, they are engaging in a process that can serve to maintain or to change them" (Kate C. McLean, et al., "Personal Identity Development in Cultural Context: The Socialization of Master Narratives about the Gendered Life Course," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 44, no. 2 [2020]: 117, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0165025419854150). I borrow this language of a master narrative framework to emphasize the normative narrativity of purity culture central to this chapter.

[16] Observable but not fully knowable. See more on intelligibility below.

through the act of writing.[17] In this way, personal narratives are not the same as ethnography or unmediated "objective" truth because autobiography embeds meaning within it. Autobiography "is always an apologetic of the individual. Autobiography is one of the ways to answer the question of what my life *means.*"[18] Personal narrative, memoir, and autobiography[19] seek narrative cohesion. One way to provide cohesion is through plotting one's life experiences toward a *telos* of "moral significance."[20] The author chooses which stories to tell, and in what order to arrange them, for the purpose of making a moral claim about their life. *I once was lost, but now I'm found / was blind, but now I see.* The genre of evangelical conversion narratives is a good example of this. These narratives were especially prolific in the mid-18th century but have their origins in Paul of Tarsus' Damascus Road experience—or Augustine's turn to Catholicism from the heretical Manicheanism—and are still being written and published today.[21] In fact, all of the memoirs and personal narratives I read for this chapter could be called evangelical conversion narratives, though the conversion stories are not necessarily from sinner to saint but saved to sinner, straight to queer, believer to skeptic.

And yet, real, lived adolescent experience does not fit neatly into linear or intelligible narratives as autobiography and memoir suggest. Thus, I resist any author's

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[17] Farley, 135. Also see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

[18] Hindmarsh, 5.

[19] For purposes of this chapter, I use autobiography, memoir, and personal narrative to mean approximately the same thing. Memoir is typically a short section of a person's whole life (autobiography). Personal narrative is an even smaller, and shorter, section.

[20] Hindmarsh citing Charles Taylor (7).

[21] See Hindmarsh.

attempt at constructing an adult-centric, intelligible narrative by looking at the specific choices the adolescent makes apart from their adult self's backwards moralizing. For example, Linda Kay Klein writes about breaking up with her high school boyfriend, Dean, because she believed it was what God wanted her to do. "*But how dare I call myself a Christian? I spent my morning primping. I spent my afternoon making out with my boyfriend. Then I spent my evening leading a Bible study!"*[22] The adult narrator Klein interprets the choice to break up with Dean as morally wrong, a reflection of sexual shame imposed on her in her evangelical Christian context.[23] She characterizes her younger self as foolish, eager to do the right thing. While all that may be true, my concern lies with how Linda, the adolescent girl, acted, especially vis-à-vis the master narrative of sexual purity. Linda acquiesced to the norms set by her spiritual community—purity in body, mind, and spirit[24]—even as she felt uneasy about her decision.[25] Like with the coming-out narratives that Susan Talburt discusses in her essay on "Intelligibility and Narrating Queer Youth," the adult Klein sets herself up for a "bifurcated life story."[26] Her narrative is structured to suggest that everything of her time in purity culture was bad and everything after or beyond purity culture was good. This binary logic merely recapitulates developmental models of adolescence—that

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[22] Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018), 6.

[23] Klein, 3, 7.

[24] Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2009), 37.

[25] Klein, 6.

[26] Angus Gordon cited in Talburt, 25.

adolescence is unformed adulthood or a special time of progress and growth—especially the lack of childhood/adolescent agency. I resist the adult-centric impulse by centering the adolescent's "present as accomplished fact," not their "processes of becoming"—becoming adults, post-evangelicals, out queer folks, and so on.[27]

The Norms of Purity Culture

Through references made in the memoirs and through books on sexuality written by evangelical writers,[28] my conversations with folks with a broad range of experiences with purity culture,[29] and through my own personal experience, I identify four sexual norms that appear to be universal, or somewhat universal, within purity culture:

> Norm #1: Sex belongs in heterosexual marriage, which is the ultimate goal of all romantic relationships.
>
> Norm #2: Purity extends beyond abstinence, but penis-in-vagina intercourse is still the normative sexual experience.
>
> Norm #3: Guys will do anything for sex; girls will do anything for love/romance.
>
> Norm #4: Girls have responsibility to stop boys from "going too far," yet they do not have the agency to make decisions about their own bodies.

My task in this chapter is to consider how young people *queer* these norms—by attempting to align or disavow, conform to or deviate from these norms—just by nature of their being adolescents. Here I am drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's and Hannah

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[27] Talburt, 35.

[28] These books were published, or republished, in the 1990s and 2000s. I find the four primary texts I cite to be representative of the primary teachings of purity culture. While there were certainly differences in how each author communicates their ideas—some brashly, others with a more parentalistic tone—the ideas were more or less the same among all four of them.

[29] I would like to give a special thanks to Melissa Deeken and her online group, Purity Culture Anonymous, who invited me to speak with them on August 6, 2021, about my research and its intersection with their stories. This group represents international, multiracial, multigendered perspectives and were invaluable me in writing this chapter.

Dyer's conceptions of queer childhood and Gabrielle Owen's queer adolescence. While the normative Child/Teen is white, middle-class, and asexual—not unlike the innocent white child of the 19th century—the real, actual child never quite lives up to this standard. Real children are simultaneously innocent and precocious, well-behaved and fussy, passive and active, and are represented by all socioeconomic classes, races, sexualities, nationalities, and genders. Children do not follow the scripted paths of adulthood—toward "full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness,"—described by developmental psychologists as linear and teleological;[30] children do not "grow up" as much as they "grow sideways," in "serpentine" fashion.[31] Owen further imagines a queer adolescence, situated in the in-betweenness of innocent childhood and mature adulthood. The Teen is conceived as "out of control, deviant, criminal, and the failed-to-become-human at the same time as it idealized youthfulness, rebellion, and freedom from adult responsibility," she writes.[32] This, too, erases or oversimplifies the ways in which the teen *is*—*is*, not just becoming.

These conceptions of Child and Teen are reflected in the norms of purity culture with its future-focus toward marriage and reproduction; its presumption of child and feminine passivity and innocence; its view of adolescents as out-of-control and deviant, in need of adult control and surveillance; and its construction of whiteness (white values, white beauty, etc.), middle-class socioeconomic status, and cisgendered

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[30] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

[31] Hannah Dyer, *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 16.

[32] Gabrielle Owen, *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 147.

heteronormativity. But as Stockton, Dyer, and Owen suggest, real, living, breathing teens do not neatly fall into these normative categories. They do not all desire marriage, and when they do, their relational path is not as linear as *first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.* Not all young women are white, cisgender, and straight—nor are they passive non-agents as the norms would suggest.

In looking at these four norms of purity culture, I draw attention to the ways teens deviate from or fail to conform to these norms—thus, how they *queer* them.[33] For example, some teens choose to interpret purity culture's centering of heterosexual intercourse as the pinnacle sexual experience to mean they can engage in anything but penile-vaginal intercourse before marriage and still remain pure. Some teens do the opposite: because the rubric for "pure" is so broad, they treat any level of intimacy as equivalent to intercourse and respond with varying forms of penitence. My concern here is primarily on teenagers' actions (their agency) more so than how they deviate from ideal Child or Adolescent subjectivity through their racial identity and class location, as I am narrowing in on (presumably) middle-class, white narratives only. I am also not beholden to how their adult selves understand their behavior as good, bad, fully formed, or in the process of becoming. With all this, I attend to the silences related to race in order to expose the moral effects of whiteness within purity culture, as a continuation of the work set out in chapters 2 and 3 of my dissertation.

<u>Norm #1: Sex belongs in heterosexual marriage, which is the ultimate goal of all romantic relationships.</u>

[33] Even in the example I gave in the last section, Linda may have conformed to the norms which made her break up with her boyfriend Dean, but there are plenty of norms she attempted to live up to but failed to in execution. See Norm #2.

Orienting adolescents toward the goal of happy, healthy heterosexual marriage is not one unique to evangelical purity culture of the 1990s and 2000s (hereafter "contemporary purity culture"), as we explored in chapter 2 of this dissertation. Concern over *who* had sex and *in what context* has been a theoethical concern of Christianity for millennia, at least since Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians.[34] In the 20th century, American Christians looked to the Bible for clarity on sexual norms, and with the help of the Revised Standard Version translation committee, were given an interpretation of Greek and Hebrew that was inclusive of their modern sexual concerns.

One primary ethical concern was homosexuality, the neologism that made certain sex acts symptomatic of a disease (19th century) and later an identity (mid-20th century). The word *homosexual* first appeared in the English Bible (RSV) in 1946. Historian Heather R. White writes that, ironically, "it was Protestants' faith in the Bible's timelessness and enduring relevance that served as a key mechanism for these textual changes. . . . Protestant biblicism thus does in practice what it opposes in theory: it generates new meanings for biblical texts."[35] In part because of these translation maneuvers, contemporary evangelical purity culture uses verses like Leviticus 18:22—one of the so-called "clobber texts" used to defend an homophobic stance—to make a quick, strawman argument that shuts down debate before it happens.[36] Several of the

[34] See Mark D. Jordan, "Scriptural Authorities," *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 20-46.

[35] Heather R. White, "How Paul Became the Straight Word: Protestant Biblicism and the Twentieth-Century Invention of Biblical Heteronormativity," in *Bodies on the Verge: Queering Pauline Epistles*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2019), 290.

[36] Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn write in *Every Young Woman's Battle*, "Lesbian experimentation is not an acceptable form of abstinence. Such goes directly against Scripture (see Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:24-26) and fuels sexual passions and curiosities to the point that 'just playing around'

books I read for this chapter were written specifically for young women with statements similar to ". . . if you're a normal, red-blooded girl, then I bet you want to be attractive to the opposite sex."[37] To respond with, *What if I am gay?* would be countered with, *It's a sin to be gay,* or more commonly now, *Same-sex attraction*[38] *is not a sin per se, but to act upon it is*.[39] At the same time, contemporary purity culture chooses which aspects of secular culture it wants to use in its arguments, generally critiquing "the world" for its "mak[ing] sex seem common, casual, and cheap."[40] This same author, Dannah Gresh, warns of the dangers of sexually transmitted infections (citing the CDC) while also arguing for abstinence pledges, which have been proven to not be effective means of delaying sex.[41]

Therefore, in contemporary purity culture, arguing for heterosexual marriage as the only proper "container"[42] for sex both *reflects* broader Christian and U.S. cultural

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sexually with another female can become addictive, creating an enormous amount of confusion, guilt, and turmoil in your life" (187).

[37] Hayley DiMarco, *Sexy Girls: How Hot Is Too Hot?* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 5. eBook.

[38] "Same-sex attraction," or "SSA," is a term used by those who believe queerness is something that does not define a person—that is, it is a phase, a choice, or alterable. See Brenda Marie Davies, *On Her Knees: Memoir of a Prayerful Jezebel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 36.

[39] This is the argument in *Every Young Woman's Battle* and the more recent texts, Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl Good God: The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018) and Rachel Joy Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture*: *Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020). eBook.

[40] Dannah Gresh, *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 159. eBook.

[41] Gresh, 27. See also Hayley DiMarco, *Technical Virgin* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 44. eBook.

[42] Marvin M. Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 25.

ideals of marriage and sexual risk, and it *raises the stakes.* Purity culture teaches that (a) sex belongs only in marriage between one man and one woman;[43] (b) Christians should not date anyone they do not intend to marry;[44] (c) and sex in marriage is enjoyable, even more so because the woman, and maybe even the man, is a virgin;[45] and therefore, (d) sex outside of marriage is painful, regrettable, or both. From adolescence, young white women, especially, are taught that they are "called to save the deepest treasures of [their] beauty for just one man" in a "covenant marriage relationship."[46] God has already chosen who this man is, and rather than initiating a relationship with a guy—even a godly one—she must wait for him to pursue her,[47] either in a dating or courting relationship.[48] Queer folks are, of course, erased from this equation as purity culture does not advocate for queer relationships or marriage (see Norm #3 for more on this).

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[43] See chapter 2, Jane Dailey, *White Fright: The Sexual Panic at the Heart of America's Racist History* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[44] "If you don't intend to marry him, don't date him" (Gresh, 70).

[45] Ethridge and Arterburn differentiate between virginity (holistic purity) and "physical virginity" (97). DiMarco writes of "technical virginity," those who do not have intercourse but have other sexual experiences, like oral sex or mutual masturbation (DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 16). In the contemporary purity culture, one can attain "secondary virginity" by recommitting themselves to a life of purity (Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 102).

[46] When writing about the hymen, Gresh calls the sex "a blood covenant between you, your husband, and God" (160).

[47] Ethridge and Arterburn warn: "It used to be that the only appropriate time for a girl to ask a guy out was for the Sadie Hawkins dance. Now young women not only track guys down to do the asking out, but they also initiate the physical relationship" (97). Gresh writes, "I had called *him* [for a date] . . . how desperate does that look? I let him *kiss* me on our first date … how easy does that seem?" (107).

[48] "Courting" as a Christian alternative to dating was popularized by the book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude toward Dating and Relationships* [Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1997]). Harris has since renounced this teaching for the harm it caused many young women (Klein, 268).

As I argue in chapter 3, the young people who participate in this purity culture both willingly participate in and resist its norms, whether intentionally or not. That is, as Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott write, we need to be careful not to understand youth as "brainwashed" nor "in rebellion against dominant discourses," for it makes us "lose sight of the actualities of their everyday experience and practices."[49] So, how did young women and queer youth navigate these normative lessons?

Addie writes about a phone call with her high school boyfriend, Chris, who tells her, "I don't think we should be together unless we're serious about marriage":

> The word *marriage* doesn't scare you the way it maybe should. In the language of evangelical relationships, marriage is the pinnacle, the goal, a summit that you've been climbing toward. You are only a sophomore in high school when this conversation occurs, but you are certain that Chris is the man you will marry.[50]

Addie does not marry Chris. As an adult, Addie begins to understand how Chris used these evangelical norms of marriage to control her. He sought her out as "submissive, compliant, unformed."[51] But at the time, as a fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girl, she believed marriage to be the "summit" and her first love, Chris, to be the man she would marry. She *wanted* this. "You *want* mania," Addie writes of herself. "When you are fourteen, truth matters less than the sound of your own heart pumping in your ears, the excitement of being swept into something greater than yourself."[52]

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[49] Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "A Sociological History of Researching Childhood and Sexuality: Continuities and Discontinuities," in *Children, Sexuality, and Sexualization,* eds. Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and R. Danielle Egan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 50.

[50] Zierman writes some of her memoir in second person, perhaps in an attempt to distance herself from beliefs she no longer holds as an adult. Addie Zierman, *When We Were on Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love and Starting Over.* (New York: Convergent Books, 2013), 77.

[51] Zierman, 46.

[52] Zierman, 58.

Brenda grew up "casually Catholic" but began attending an evangelical non-denominational church when she was 12. There, her "sexual fascination skyrocketed, and with it [her] anxiety about 'saving [herself] for marriage.'" Brenda was told the importance of waiting to have sex till marriage, and that if she waited, marital sex would be "amazing."[53] The lessons she learned reflect what Gresh writes: "*If* you will wait [to have sex], *then* it will be exciting!"[54] Brenda took pride in her virginity as a young person:

> One Friday night, while my peers were somewhere indulging in hard lemonade and indiscriminate hand jobs, we Christian teens were dressed in white, promising our purity to the Lord. I signed a virginity contract in the presence of my parents.[55]

A little older, Brenda married the first man she had intercourse with, Brandon, as a way to assuage the guilt she felt for having premarital sex. She was promised "the greatest possible sexual fulfillment" in marriage[56] and that it would be a "great joy to enter into a covenant relationship with a man on your wedding night with no memory of having that covenant marred!"[57] But Brenda discovered she not enjoy being married, it did not end her feelings of guilt, nor did it stop her young husband from cheating on her.[58]

Addie and Brenda interacted with this norm of heterosexual marriage in different ways. Addie was more eager than Brenda to participate and plan her life around this

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[53] Davies, 3.

[54] Gresh, 172.

[55] Davies, 6.

[56] Nancy Leigh DeMoss and Dannah Gresh, *Lies Young Women Believe* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 92.

[57] Gresh, 164.

[58] Davies, 74.

"goal." Brenda was not "bother[ed]" by the rules of marriage, took pride in her virginity, but ultimately had heterosexual intercourse before marriage to the man she eventually married. In some respects, Brenda's narrative is consistent with the warnings of the literature: "Making poor sexual choices will bring consequences. I am not talking about pregnancy or AIDS or STDs," writes Gresh. "I am talking about the cancer that eats away at the heart."[59] Brenda refers to her relationship with Brandon as a "pursuit of folly," likely referencing Proverbs 9:[60] "After having sex with Brandon, I'd sit on the toilet, trying not to cry. . . . I was shut off from my intuition and my Creator, running off the fumes of teenage hormones, ignited by sparks of shame."[61] According to the logic of purity culture, marrying Brandon should have erased the guilt and shame of her premarital sex, as he was her one and only sexual partner.[62] And yet, Brenda's feelings of shame only increased in her marriage. "Still, sex remained sinful, and I blamed the guilt-ridden sensation on my wretched self. . . . Purity culture has the power to convince us that even married sex is a sin if done the 'wrong' way," she writes.[63]

Jo, in Klein's book, uses tiger/lamb language to describe the expectation that a young woman is supposed to be "a lamb—chaste and pure as the driven snow until you

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[59] Gresh, 179.

[60] Proverbs 9:13-18, NIV: "Folly is an unruly woman; she is simple and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way, 'Let all who are simple come to my house!' To those who have no sense she says, 'Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!' But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead."

[61] Davies, 59.

[62] This is what Brenda believes. ". . . if I married Brandon, I'd have slept with one person. I'd be a good girl again. I wouldn't be a lukewarm ho; I'd be a girl who slept with The One, a little too soon" (Davies, 68).

[63] Davies, 90.

are married. And then you have to be a tigress in bed."[64] In this way, purity culture reinforces the binary between childhood innocence and informed, mature adulthood; it presumes a linear progression from one to the other where childhood and its queer affects are "discarded."[65] Brenda does not fit this progression at all. She has conflicted emotions that do not make sense within purity culture: she cries on the toilet after having sex with her husband. She should be happy and sexually satisfied within her young marriage (assuming, that is, she is upholding her responsibility to please her husband), but she is not.[66]

For Addie, it is important to recognize that dating with the intention of marriage was what she wanted at the time; she was not a brainwashed, unthinking marionette. She was heavily influenced by purity culture and vulnerable to manipulation—as the older Addie recognizes—but she also expressed her agency in her short-lived romance with Chris. Toward the end of their relationship, Addie planned a birthday date for him, which he tried to back out of:

> "No," I said.
>
> "What?"
>
> "I said *no,* Chris." I tried to steady my voice. "I planned all this stuff for your birthday. You have to come over. We had *plans.*"[67]

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[64] Klein, 139.

[65] See chapter 3. Quote from Dyer, 7.

[66] See Amy DeRogatis, "Sex, Marriage, and Salvation" in *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[67] Zierman, 91.

After she and Chris broke up, Addie dated other young men: "I wanted to see what it was like—to kiss someone just for the fun of it, without a three-page contract, without any thoughts of marriage."[68] Addie understood her kissing many different guys as rebellious, even as this behavior is considered typical in contexts other than purity culture. It is "normal" within a construction of adolescence as a period of rebellion, as Owen describes, but it is deviant within the normative framing of purity culture.

Addie writes of this season of dating as the year she "found [her] voice."[69] Addie, like other memoirists, writes that she had no identity (or an "unformed" identity) while in purity culture.[70] While girls like Addie may have been reliant on evangelical purity culture for their values, beliefs, and tastes in music, clothing, and Saturday night activities, they are still full sexual subjects, even as children. She may have "found her voice" in the sense that she was finally confident to name what she wanted, even as it went against the desires of the men in her life—but Addie had a voice the whole time.[71]

Norm #2: Purity extends beyond abstinence, but penis-in-vagina intercourse is still the normative sexual experience.

In contemporary evangelical purity culture, *purity* is not merely synonymous with *abstinence* but is holistic, involving a young person's "body, mind, heart, and spirit."[72] In

[68] Zierman, 100-101.

[69] Zierman, 102.

[70] Zierman, 46, 42. See also Brandon Wallace, *Straight Face* (Portland, OR: Green Bridge Press, 2014), 53.

[71] It is also worth noting that though Addie felt free that year after dating Chris, she still conformed to many of the norms of purity culture into her young adulthood, such that she and her to-be husband did not have sex before marriage.

[72] Ethridge and Arterburn, 37.

defense of its long, and often quite specific, list of impure behaviors, thoughts, and desires, purity culture texts often cite the first clause of Ephesians 5:3 (NIV): "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality [*porneía*]. . . ."[73] Among the potentially impure are the following, organized by author:[74]

Oral sex

Sexting

Wearing certain clothes, especially "Belly rings. Miniskirts. Short shorts. Low-cut shirts."

Watching certain shows on TV

Being alone with a date in an apartment or house[75]

Wearing a lot of makeup[76]

Associating with "a wild, partying, sexual nonbeliever" friend[77]

Mutual masturbation

Anything that involves genitals

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[73] Mark Jordan—along with Biblical scholars like David Wheeler-Reed, Jennifer W. Knust, and Dale B. Martin—writes that Paul or Pseudo-Paul does not necessarily use *porneia* to "refer to specific acts or cases." In fact, "Pauline texts may be using *porneia* metaphorically or symbolically, not intending to refer to specific sexual acts at all" (Jordan, 27-28). See also David Wheeler-Reed, Jennifer W. Knust, and Dale B. Martin, "Can a Man Commit πορνεία with His Wife?" *JBL* 137, no. 2 (2018): 383-398, http://dx.doi.org/10.15699/jbl.

[74] Note that all of these books were written specifically to cisgender teen girls.

[75] Gresh, 27, 99, 87, 101.

[76] DiMarco, *Sexy Girls*, 35.

DiMarco uses the tragic story of JonBenét Ramsey, the child beauty queen who was murdered in the 1990s, as a cautionary tale for wearing too much makeup: "In her pictures, [JonBenét] looked like a miniature adult—so much so that she turned on some grown men, who created shrines to her and watched every pageant she was in. What mothers and young girls alike don't understand is that too much makeup too soon can make you look so much older that creepy old guys start getting really turned on" (DiMarco, *Sexy Girls*, 34).

[77] DiMarco, *Sexy Girls*, 41.

Anal sex

Petting parties[78]

Rainbow circles[79]

Hooking up

Feeling each other up

Making out in public

Dry sex or dry humping

Watching romantic comedies as they are considered "female porn"[80]

Showing cleavage

Looking at Abercrombie & Fitch posters

Listening to music or watching movies that use "sexual humor and language"[81]

Hand jobs and blow jobs

Masturbation

"[T]alking on the phone with a guy after bedtime hours"[82]

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[78] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 18-19.

[79] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 18-19.

Rainbow circles or rainbow parties were "group oral sex parties in which each girl wears a different shade of lipstick, and each guy tries to emerge sporting every one of the various colors" (Tamar Lewin, "Are These Parties For Real?" *The New York Times*, June 30, 2005, accessed October 15, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/30/fashion/thursdaystyles/are-these-parties-for-real.html). Rainbow parties have since been debunked as a sex/moral panic propagated by Oprah Winfrey, among others, in the early 2000s.

[80] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 19, 48.

Romantic comedies are "female porn" because they are thought to stimulate a woman's romantic desires the way pornography stimulates a man's physical desires.

[81] DeMoss and Gresh, 91.

[82] Ethridge and Arterburn, 38, 62, 116.

Scholar Christine J. Gardner writes about the intentional switch from *abstinence* language to *purity* language within evangelical purity campaigns of the 1990s and 2000s. Purity was more holistic, including abstinence as part of it, but extending beyond. Gardner quotes an interview with Gresh: "Well, you can abstain from sex and not be pure, I think. Purity is more all encompassing. It's about your thought life. It's about your emotional life. It's about everything, whereas abstinence is obviously a lot more about the technicality of sex."[83] Having a wider notion of purity "has the practical result of eliminating the need for evangelical abstinence campaigns to explicitly define what constitutes sex," writes Gardner. As the list above indicates, more than just penetration "counts" as sex, therefore extending the sexual norms of purity culture beyond the context of the bedroom. "Purity becomes a general call to enact the spiritual decision of a Christian to follow Christ as a physical decision of Christlike lifestyle behavior," writes Gardner.[84]

At the same time, however, the messages of purity culture still overwhelmingly emphasize the importance of avoiding premarital penile-vaginal intercourse, perhaps because those activities *lead* to PVI intercourse. This is reflected in purity culture writer Hayley DiMarco's suggestion that backrubs and tickle-fights are foreplay:[85] "All this stuff we've been talking about is all made to lead to one ultimate thing—sex."[86] Whether unintentionally or not, DiMarco's insistence on the primacy of PVI intercourse reflects

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[83] Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 30. eBook.

[84] Gardner, 31.

[85] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 26-32.

[86] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 31.

the white racial project of evangelicalism: that (white) heterosexual marriage and intercourse is important to the survival of the white race. Purity, even as it is reconceived as a spiritual goal, as Gardner describes, still implies conceptions of racial purity deep within United States, and evangelical, history.

Jo, Linda, and Val describe feelings of shame that were birthed out of an extended definition of purity. Rather than being an alternative to the *just say no* of abstinence rhetoric, the standard of purity made even seemingly innocent acts feel dirty, as if the teen were just one step from having PVI intercourse. Jo reflects:

> I had one half-kiss[87] at the age of sixteen that made me brush my teeth for ten minutes afterward. He kissed me but I did not kiss him back. I think I mostly just stood there, kind of horrified and fascinated at the same time. But I felt guilty, ashamed, dirty for years. . . . I thought I was dirty and ruined, a soiled package.[88]

DiMarco and others call this the "slippery slope," as if unaware of the term as a common fallacy. Those backrubs and tickle-flights "are part of that romantic journey down the slippery slope of sexuality," she writes.[89] Elizabeth Gish, in her critique of purity culture rhetoric, refers to this as "harm and damage rhetoric."[90] This rhetoric unambiguously suggests that a young person is "damaged goods" if she behaves in an impure way, which in the logic of purity culture, could also involve merely thinking or desiring impurely. Linda shares:

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[87] Klein writes of a half-kiss: "One person might use it to refer to a peck or an otherwise short kiss, another to a kiss that she turned away from, etc. For many, the intention is to keep at least as many purity points as she deserves by not claiming a whole kiss when, for whatever reason, it didn't really feel whole" (13).

[88] Klein, 13.

[89] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 31.

[90] See Elizabeth Gish, "'Are You a "Trashable" Styrofoam Cup?' Harm and Damage Rhetoric in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018): 5-22, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.2.03.

> I had left the evangelical church but its messages about sex and gender still whirred within my body. Even after I calmed myself down and apologetically kissed my boyfriend goodbye, I couldn't let go of the lingering fear that we had gotten too close to having sex this time, that I had gotten pregnant, and that my sexual sins would soon be exposed to the religious community I'd left but still desperately wanted to approve of me. Eventually, I'd walk to the local drugstore and buy a pregnancy test. I was still a virgin, but taking the test was the only way I could steady my breathing.[91]

Linda was not alone in her midnight drugstore runs. Val tells Klein in an interview: "Surely you've heard of 'the phantom baby'? How nobody has had sex but they all think they're pregnant? I've never met an evangelical woman who doesn't irrationally believe she's pregnant at some point."[92] Linda believed she was sliding down the slope so fast that she would somehow get pregnant from behaviors that could not, in reality, cause conception.

These three personal testimonies emphasize purity culture's harm—and trauma, as many argue (see Norm #4)—on young women's valuing of and sense of agency over their bodies. The personal testimonies also show the ways in which these three young women made sense of the puzzle pieces before them, to borrow a metaphor from chapter 3. Jo was given enough information to believe that even kissing—a "half-kiss"—was dangerous and dirty, so she brushed her teeth. (Not to mention Jo turned away from the kiss, even if she could not stop the boy's initiation.) Linda was so afraid that her getting "too close to having sex" was the same as having pregnancy-possible penis-in-vagina sex, so she chose to get a pregnancy test. We could call these choices—brushing one's teeth, getting a pregnancy test—trauma responses or pitiful or just plain weird.[93] Or, we

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[91] Klein, 7.

[92] Klein, 195.

[93] A similar conversation is happening presently (fall 2021) regarding "soaking," the apparently wide-spread practice among conservative Mormons: "soaking is when someone inserts their penis into their

can imagine these actions as the girls' failed attempts to conform to the dominant sexual norms of purity culture. Jack Halberstam writes about the queerness of failure as it complicates the adult-centric valuing of success, mastery, and narrative closure.[94] Linda and Jo fail to live up to the norm of purity culture—that is, they behave in ways that are considered impure by some—by kissing and getting "close to having sex." They also fail by not reaching the final *telos* of their actions. That is, a successful kiss would be one that is returned or fully received—not a "half kiss." Successful sex would be intercourse that leads to reproduction. Jo and Linda achieve neither, exemplifying instead a queer act of failure.

Scarlet and Alma found different means of interpreting the puzzle pieces of purity culture—not by conforming but more actively resisting or negotiating the norms that shaped their evangelical world. Scarlet shares with Klein:

> We're rolling around naked; he would be rubbing his penis on my vagina but not in it; I would have orgasms from it. But I still, in my brain, I could be like, "We're not having sex." I would still be a virgin.[95]

Scarlet interpreted the purity culture script in such a way that allowed her to lie naked with her boyfriend and mutually masturbate one another. She negotiated the boundary set to her by purity culture and pushed against it. This did not free her from the totalizing

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partner's vagina without thrusting, 'marinating' the penis in vaginal fluid without creating any friction." The practice serves as a "loophole," a way for Mormon singles to claim technical virginity (Gita Jackson, "Viral 'Jump Humping' TikTok Teaches the World About Mormon Sex," *Vice*, September 27, 2021, accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/akgb88/viral-jump-humping-tiktok-teaches-the-world-about-mormon-sex). The practice is met with ridicule and pity on social media, as the above article shows. See chapter 5 for a fuller analysis on soaking.

[94] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 119.

[95] Klein, 195.

effects of the norm, however. Like most of the stories explored in this chapter, shame accompanies Scarlet's behavior. She writes how the further in her boyfriend's penis would penetrate, the more she "would recoil and freak out."[96]

Alma tells Klein that masturbation was a means of surviving "so many years of chastity":

> I had to find ways to do it without totally breaking the rules so I didn't hate myself for it. I would fantasize that I was with my future husband and we were on our honeymoon. Or I would think about that verse that they always referred to in order to say, "don't masturbate": "If you sin with your right hand, cut it off." I figured, "Well, I won't use my hand then." . . . "Oh, I have this marker that just happens to be here, or this pencil or whatever. Oops! I don't know how that got there! . . . And I also used to arrange these little pointy tissues in my panties so that they would rub against me while I walked.[97]

Alma found ways to live into her sexual agency "so that [she] didn't hate [herself] for it." She masturbated, a behavior condemned by most, though not all, evangelical writers.[98] And as if borrowing from the playbook of evangelical biblicism, Alma used a literal interpretation of the Bible—"if you sin with your right hand, cut it off"—to creatively justify her sexual choices. However, even in Alma's fantasy, she conformed to Norm #1 as she imagined herself having sex with her future husband on their honeymoon.[99]

Scarlet and Alma both resisted the norms of purity culture in important, though limited, ways. Scarlet insisted that sex meant penile-vaginal intercourse, which gave her the rationale to participate in non-penetrative acts with her boyfriend. The closer to penetration she got, though, the more shame and guilt she felt. Alma found creative

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[96] Klein, 195.

[97] Klein, 125.

[98] Interestingly, in his book *Preparing for Adolescence*, Focus on the Family's James Dobson does not condemn masturbation but deems it a gray area (James C. Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence* [Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1978], 87, https://archive.org/details/isbn_0884490459/page/6/mode/2up).

[99] Klein, 125.

means of pleasuring herself that still took into consideration scriptural mandates about abstaining. We could describe both Alma's and Scarlet's choices as *queer,* as neither act—mutual masturbation nor solo masturbation—leads to the "success" of heterosexual intercourse. Their behaviors are queer—and still a means to conform to the norms of purity culture. As Scott and Jackson write, these young people were not necessarily intentionally rebelling against the system. Rather, they were interpreting the sexual scripts—the jigsaw puzzles—before them in ways that make sense to them in their context, in their particularity. These stories invite us to reflect on the actuality of adolescent behavior not make a moral judgment about whether masturbation (solo or otherwise) is moral or immoral behavior. Indeed, these young women's stories help us understand *their* moral reasoning, how they make sense of their choices within the broader frame of conservative sexual ethics.

Norm #3: Guys will do anything for sex; girls will do anything for love/romance.

John Eldredge, the author of the bestselling evangelical men's book, *Wild at Heart,* summarizes the prevailing view of gender within purity culture: "gender is a more fundamental reality than sex."[100] While gender theorists and sex historians have argued that both gender and sex are culturally and historically constructed, Eldredge's comment emphasizes how evangelical purity culture values not only *sexual* difference between "biological men and women" (i.e. the primary and secondary sex organs, hormones, and chromosomes that lead to licit heterosexual, married, monogamous intercourse that produces offspring) but also *gender* difference. These two are also inextricably linked; a

[100] John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 35.

person's gender ought to reflect their biological sex. [101] But, as Eldredge insists, gender is even more essential than the biological sex of the body. That is, the soul or spirit of a person—apart from the body—is gendered, and those genders are either feminine or masculine.[102]

In understanding how this norm is negotiated by adolescents in contemporary evangelical purity culture, I narrow in on one aspect: how desire itself is gendered. Like views on marriage, this norm is rooted in early Christian doctrine, most easily traced back to the teachings of Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century. Drawing on common Neoplatonic thought of his day, Augustine taught that there were two parts of the inner self: the intellect/mind—the part made in the image of God and most associated with masculinity—and the body—the un-Godlike quality in the humans most associated with femininity. In a Prelapsarian world, he taught, the intellect/mind successfully ruled over the body, just as the man ruled over the woman. Augustine imagined that in this Prelapsarian world where the genders were properly ordered, sex could happen without lust or pleasure.[103] Procreation, the primary purpose of sex, would be a rational act, "like

[101] Several recent books on evangelical gender roles have spotlighted just how pervasive and damaging this norm is, for men, women, and non-binary folks alike. See, for instance, Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020) and Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021). Older texts on the subject include John P. Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001) and Amy DeRogatis, "Sex, Marriage, and Salvation," *Saving Sex*, 42-70.

[102] Eldredge borrowed this idea from 20th century Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis (Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *A Sword Between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010], 61). Lewis imagines a non-human species as gendered masculine and feminine, though they do not have human sexual anatomy. See C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra: A Novel (*New York: Scribner, 2003 [1944]).

[103] Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIV, trans. William Babcock, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/7, 98-137 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013).

shaking hands."[104] After the Fall, the genders became disordered.[105] Augustine taught that Eve was the one enticed by the serpent; Adam knew better but did not want Eve to live outside of Paradise without him. Thus, Adam's sin was his "losing male rank by obeying his wife (his lower self), rather than making his wife obey him as her 'head.'"[106] As a result, man's base, bodily nature continuously refuses to submit to man's intellectual nature, as exemplified by involuntary arousal (i.e., an erection).[107] Augustine's theology of sin leaves little room for women's agency or desire; instead, women are blamed for "stimulating" lust in men.[108] This theological anthropology contributes to a culture of victim-blaming and gender double-standards, which we will explore more in-depth in Norm #4. It also contributes to reifying sex and gender normativity, which erases queer possibilities.

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[104] Simon Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58.

Augustine was critical of one's motivation for having sex as well. In his anti-Manichaean treatise, "On Continence," written in 412, Augustine calls it "strange continence!" that this heretical sect would abstain from sex out of hatred for the body (Augustine, "On Continence," cited in Elizabeth A. Clark, *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 36). In *City of God*, he similarly calls it a sin to only abstain from something God prohibits in fear of punishment (Book XIV).

[105] Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIII, trans. William Babcock, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/7, 68-97 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013). See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Augustine: Sexuality, Gender, and Women," in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. Judith Chelius Stark (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 56-57.

[106] Ruether, 54.

[107] Ruether, 56.

Augustine writes that in paradise, humans will be able to control their bodily members via the will. That is, a man can have an erection when he wants to (to procreate) but will not have an erection when he doesn't want to (when aroused). See Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XXII, trans. William Babcock, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/7 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), 536.

[108] Ruether, 56.

"God created us all to be sexual beings, either male or female," write Ethridge and Arterburn in *Every Young Woman's Battle.* "Our femininity or masculinity is an expression of who we are. We are sexual beings from the time we are conceived until we die and leave our earthly bodies for our heavenly home. . . . You are a sexual being all the time, and that's something you cannot change."[109] We can credit Etheridge and Arterburn for having a holistic vision for sexuality, similar to our definition of sexuality in chapter 3, which expands sexuality outside the realm of genitals and genital touching. [110] However, the binary is unapologetically reinforced in this statement: there are two ways to be gendered, either/or. Those two genders are inseparably linked to two biological sexes. That is, to be feminine is to be female and have a vagina; to be masculine is to be male and have a penis.

The authors continue on to assert that because of our biological sex and gendered difference, we desire differently—and we desire in only two ways:

> So while young men are primarily aroused by what they see with their eyes, as a young woman you are more aroused by what you hear and feel. . . . In addition, a male can enjoy the act of sex without committing his heart or bonding spiritually with the object of his physical desire. This is the ultimate act of compartmentalization, and guys are masters of it. Never assume a guy feels what you feel.[111]

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[109] Ethridge and Arterburn, 28.

[110] Sexuality is *an embodied component of the human capacity to know* and *a way to communicate and form of expression of one's self-understanding. . . . [S]exuality is more than the sum total of our sexual behaviors* and [we] reciprocally gain understanding from others when expressing our sexuality. Our sexuality is *developed in personal (and systematic) relationships affected by social, biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual forces* (Kate Ott, "Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics: A Social Justice Obligation to Adolescent Sexual Health," in *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7, no. 2 [2007]: para 11).

[111] Ethridge and Arterburn, 31.

Gresh writes something similar as well: "While guys often struggle with visual temptation, I find that most of the time you and I are more prone to simple, emotional fantasy" (64).

These differences in desire are often communicated something like, "Most of the time guys give *love* to get sex, but girls give *sex* to get *love*."[112] Thus it is normative for guys to want sex but not love and for girls to want love but not sex. Both guys who want love and girls who want sex are deemed deviant, even if they are heterosexual. This frame is even used to warn young women of young men's true desires. DiMarco warns girls that even a man's desire to talk to her is suspect; "they spend hours listening to you because maybe, just maybe, it might lead to something more, shall we say, something physical." She reassures her reader that this isn't because this guy is a "scumbag"; this is just how men are. They "have different wants and needs."[113] Per this worldview, guys' masculine desire for sex and young women's feminine desire for love inevitably leads to the act of penile-vaginal intercourse (see Norms #1 and #2), which again is exclusively binary:

> God designed the male and female bodies so the penis fits perfectly inside the vagina during the act of sexual intercourse. . . . God wants you to enjoy sex, and that is why He gave you a body part, the clitoris, that has no other purpose but to give you sexual pleasure. Yay, God!"[114]

We can resonate with Ethridge and Arterburn's joy in the clitoris' one role, especially as disinformation about the clitoris, and gynecology in general, is pervasive in conservative Christianity and beyond. However, Ethridge and Arterburn are limiting the joy of clitoral stimulation to marital PVI intercourse only—an unfortunate limitation as only 18% of cisgender women experience orgasm through vaginal stimulation alone.[115]

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[112] Ethridge and Arterburn, 48.

[113] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 59.

[114] Ethridge and Arterburn, 32.

[115] Daniel Oberhaus, "The Biggest-Ever Orgasm Study Tells Us More About How Women Come," *Vice*, September 6, 2017, accessed October 30, 2021,

Ethridge and Arterburn, along with DiMarco, speak of these gender and sex norms as descriptive—*this is how it is*—and as prescriptive—*how it ought to be*. When both their books, *Every Young Woman's Battle* and *Sexy Girls,* address queer sexuality, it is set up as deviations from this sex/gender norm. In writing about queer dress, DiMarco says that "femininity is how you were made. You were made a girl. . . . Why would [God] care enough to let his people know that it's not appropriate for girls to dress like guys and guys to dress like girls?"[116] Ethridge and Arterburn devote the afterword of their book to speaking directly to women who "desire other women."[117] They write that they believe that "unlike your sex or ethnicity,"—and gender as it is tied to sex—"homosexuality isn't some predetermined condition that was passed onto you genetically when you were conceived in your mother's womb. A person develops these desires through a variety of different experiences, but you are not powerless to develop different, more healthy desires."[118] They write that "hundreds" of "former" queer folks have converted from homosexuality to heterosexuality and recommend the now-defunct conversion therapy group, Exodus International, as one possible solution.[119]

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https://www.vice.com/en/article/neepb8/the-science-of-female-pleasure-still-needs-more-attention.

[116] DiMarco, *Sexy Girls*, 52.

[117] Ethridge and Arterburn, 233.

[118] Ethridge and Arterburn, 234.

[119] Ethridge and Arterburn, 234-235.

In 2012, the then-president of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, denounced conversion therapy at the heels of California's statewide ban of conversion therapy. See Ed Payne, "Group Apologizes to Gay Community, Shuts Down 'Cure' Ministry," *CNN*, July 8, 2013, accessed October 23, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown/index.html. Exodus International was the subject of the 2021 Netflix documentary, *Pray Away*.

Young queer folks of all genders have had to navigate these gender and sex norms and locate their desire within this frame. Brandon Wallace's memoir *Straight-Face* traces his experience growing up Baptist in the South, discovering he was gay as a child, then hiding from his desires for years and experiencing inner turmoil as a result. From this internal chaos, Brandon developed a split identity. There was his true self he kept quiet and deep inside himself, and then there was "Straight-Face," his externally facing self that presented as the perfect Christian man. Brandon writes,

> On one hand, I had these teachings: I had to be pure, undefiled by the world, and without sin for God to really love me, and that meant being totally clean in thought and action. It also definitely meant not being "a gay." But on the other hand, I had these feelings—these thoughts—that I couldn't help. I had these attractions which I was told were an abomination, but I simply had no control over them.[120] I looked at some of the boys my age and just wanted to be close to them, but then I heard over my shoulder from preachers—my own preacher—that God hated the way I felt, and that I was probably doomed for an eternity of damnation because of it. That is a lot for a ten year old to take in![121]

Brandon felt the tug between wanting to be straight and wanting to present his real self to the world.

One strategy he tried was looking at heterosexual pornography to try to turn himself straight. Even though looking at porn is a clear violation of Norm #2, teenage Brandon felt that being gay was somehow a worse sin than looking at explicit videos.

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[120] See Augustine section above.

In purity culture, young men are taught that they are not in control of their bodies and thus unresponsible for them (the opposite and complementary teaching for young women). For example, spiritual writer Amy Frykholm writes about a young man named Mark who tried hard to align his adolescent dating life to the norms of contemporary evangelical purity culture: "Mark had to demand ever more control over his animalistic, hedonistic self and keep his will functioning at a high level." At his Christian college years later, Mark's peers would brag not about "conquest" in the locker room but "restraint" (Amy Frykholm, *See Me Naked: Stories of Sexual Exile in American Christianity* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2011], 39, 42).

[121] Wallace, 19.

Garrard Conley expresses something similar in his memoir, *Boy Erased*; getting a girl pregnant out of wedlock was, in his world, more forgivable than having queer desire.[122] Even still, as much as Brandon "watched, and watched, and watched" pornography, he could not escape his queer desire. He writes, "The entire time though, my eyes always went back to watching the guys. Sometimes, I would even get frustrated when a woman would get in the way, and then I would get mad at myself for getting frustrated about that."[123] By early adolescence, Brandon began dating girls, though desperately wishing he was holding hands with the boys he liked instead. Recognizing his desire as deviant, Brandon "would get angry with myself and feel defeated." The straight relationships he formed were not all distasteful. He enjoyed the "companionship" he experienced with girls, even though he did not desire to be sexual with them.[124] This too is a queer desire, a deviation from the masculine expectation to only desire sex from girls, not friendship.

Brandon and Garrard had a felt experience of their deviance and made painful moves to conform to the norms of purity culture because of it. Ultimately, though, they could not fully live into the norms without losing a sense of themselves as full subjects in the process. Brandon bifurcated his adolescent self; he had his public "Straight-Face" and his inner, private gay self. Garrard did something similar, imagining the two parts of himself splitting. "I am both his [father's] son and not his son. I am both native and tourist. A speaker of tongues he does not yet know. Believer and nonbeliever."[125]

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[122] Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased: A Memoir* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016).

[123] Wallace, 18.

[124] Wallace, 36.

[125] Garrard Conley, "Land of Plenty" in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*, eds. Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal (Indianapolis, IN: Epiphany Publishing, 2019), 35.

Brandon and Garrard used their agency for the sake of survival, not to rebel or revolt against a harmful system. Choosing to hide their sexuality, though ultimately not a liberative act as their adult selves come to realize, protected them from the harm they would have experienced from their families of origin and their churches.

Brandon and Garrard negotiated their desire within purity culture through hiding and splitting as a means of protection from the harm that they feared in their churches and families. The harm is based on this rigid construction of gender, believed to be inextricably linked to sex. We can imagine how their stories would have been even more complicated had they not been white, middle-class boys. Being, say, Latinx immigrants with little command of the English language would put the boys in more economically and socially precarious positions in intersection with their sexual identities. Coming out could mean more than severing a relationship with a parent—a difficult enough loss—but it could mean not having the same access to resources like extended family in the United States or the language acumen to find shelter if their families kick them out. Garrard and Brandon's race, then, offered them a certain level of privilege, even as they navigated really troubling realities internally and in their homes and churches.

Norm #4: Girls have responsibility to stop boys from "going too far," yet they do not have the agency to make decisions about their own bodies.

The third norm of purity culture lends itself well to the fourth: if there are two immutable genders corresponding sexes that desire in different ways, then it is no surprise that these two distinct genders have different responsibilities in relationship to each other. Purity culture teaches that it is a young woman's responsibility to guard men's sexuality: to make sure he does not let his sexual desire "rule over him" (to borrow language from the Augustinian tradition) and to make sure that she herself does not

"cause him to stumble."[126] On the flip side, purity culture teaches young men that they do not have control over their bodies; their sexual desire is often described as an uncontrollable beast.[127] "[E]very time you make it too easy on him by showing him how willing and ready you are, you lost out," writes DiMarco. "He starts to think of you less and less as a potential girlfriend and more and more as a great hookup or onetime make-out session."[128] Historian Heather Hendershot argues that in purity culture, both boys and girls are thought of as not having control over their bodies, though the genders perform this lack of self-control differently. "Boys and girls who are repeatedly told that at a certain point they are no longer in control may as a result feel less in control, and it may actually be more difficult to stop sexual activity if one conceives of one's body as a runaway train," she writes. "Crudely put, when all bodily control is lost, boys give in to their urge to rape and girls give in to their urge to submit to rape."[129]

Meaningful consent is not discussed often within purity culture, certainly not in the texts cited here. To talk about consent would necessitate female agency and control over one's body, both outside the logic of purity culture. The implications of this are troubling, to say the least. Without language of meaningful consent, sexual assault is

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[126] This is a reference to Matthew 18:6, NIV: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Klein and others point out that this verse is frequently used to shame women for "causing" young men to lust or force their bodies on young women (3-4). Perhaps a better verse to use, writes Klein, is Matthew 5:29, NIV. "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

[127] See Heather Hendershot, "Virgins for Jesus: The Gender Politics of Therapeutic Christian Media," in *Shaking the World for Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 87-113.

[128] DiMarco, *Sexy Girls,* 21.

[129] Hendershot, 93.

defined only narrowly, as a man violently forcing himself on a woman. This excludes all the ways in which people of all genders are limited in their ability to truly consent within certain contexts, such as when a person is not of sound mind or is being groomed by a person with more social power than them. For example, at the beginning of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, the story of Jules Woodson circulated online. As a 17-year-old girl, growing up evangelical, Jules's youth pastor isolated her in his car and asked her to perform oral sex on him. Because she did so, and he did not use violent force, he and the church referred to this as a "sexual incident," not as sexual assault.[130] But, as second wave feminists fought hard to communicate, no child or a congregant in the care of a pastor can meaningfully consent to sexual behaviors. Therefore, within purity culture, unless a woman proves herself to be completely pure, or the *perfect survivor*, she may be blamed for causing a man to rape her.[131]

Feminist theologians and scholars of religion have spent decades contending with conservative Christianity's contribution to "rape culture," or a culture in which sexual violence is normalized,[132] and recent texts like Emily Joy Allison's *#ChurchToo* and

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[130] Woodson, Jules. "I Was Assaulted. He Was Applauded." New York Times Opinion, *The New York Times,* March 9, 2018, accessed November 3, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/opinion/jules-woodson-andy-savage-assault.html.

[131] Kristen Leslie calls this the "Myth of the Virgin Mary Survivor," as no woman is a "perfect" victim of abuse (Kristen Leslie, *When Violence is No Stranger: Pastoral Counseling with Survivors of Acquaintance Rape* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], 107).

[132] See Joanne Carlson Brown and Carol R. Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1989). Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1983). Kathleen G. Greider, Gloria A. Johnson, and Kristen J. Leslie, "Three Decades of Women Writing for Our Lives," in *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology*, eds. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Nancy Nienhuis, "Battered Women and the Construction of Sanctity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 1 (2001): 33-61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002401. Nancy Nason-Clark and Barbara Fisher-Townsend, "Acting Abusively in the Household of Faith," in *Responding to Abuse in Christian Homes,* eds. Nancy Nason-Clark and Barbara Fisher-Townsend (Eugene, OR: Wipf &

Jamie Lee Finch's *You Are Your Own* address the perpetuation of sexual violence in contemporary evangelical purity culture.[133] This critique is internal to evangelicalism as well. In her 2020 book, *Talking Back to Purity Culture,* Rachel Joy Welcher writes that one of the primary issues with purity culture is that it promotes abusive behaviors. "When we teach men that they can't control themselves, we demean their dignity as image bearers and give them a preemptive excuse to abuse others," she writes. "When we teach women that men can't control themselves, we communicate that abuse is not only inevitable but acceptable."[134] This has become one of the most widespread critiques of purity culture, and rightfully so. But in waging this critique, we must take the lead from certain feminist and womanist scholars who urge us not to erase a person's agency, and therefore dignity, in attending to her vulnerabilities. This too sets up the binary of a "good" victim and a "bad" victim. If we only emphasize a woman's vulnerability to being raped, we are tempted to call an act of protection and resistance—like asking her rapist to wear a condom—consent.[135]

In *Every Young Woman's Battle,* Ethridge and Arterburn are careful to distinguish sexual assault from sexual sin (i.e. promiscuity, homosexuality, and other impure behaviors). They write in italics: "*No one deserves to be abused, regardless of how she dresses, where she goes, or what she does*. Read that sentence again and believe it. Even

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Stock, 2011). Christie Cozad Nueger and James Newton Poling, *Men's Work in Preventing Violence Against Women* (New York: Haworth Press, 2002).

[133] Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021). Jamie Lee Finch, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (Independently Published, 2019).

[134] Welcher, 103.

[135] See chapter 5 for more on evangelical responses to purity culture.

if you initiate physical involvement, you have the right to change your mind and choose not to engage in further sexual activity at any point. . . . *Rape and promiscuity are entirely different things.*" [136] They write that purity has nothing to do with the actions done to them but with the specific choices they make. However, just one page later, the authors provide a list of "practical ways to avoid being sexually abused or raped," undermining their previous statement.[137] The latter message was internalized by young people like Sofia to mean that she was to blame for her own rape: ". . . all I could think of was the shame aspect of it—*They'll know I had sex.* When, in reality, I was being raped. They'd think I was sinful, like now I was a chewed up piece of gum and no one would want me."[138] If having sex makes a young woman disposable like a Styrofoam cup,[139] used like a junky car,[140] or repulsive like a chewed-up piece of gum, then no wonder young people interpret a violation of their bodies (i.e., rape) as causing these same outcomes.

Sofia's experience of harm may have been exacerbated because she, unlike others in this chapter, is identified as Mexican American, though growing up she attended a white evangelical church. Sofia says that "her 'curvy, Mexican body' was policed as she went through puberty, and that she was made to cover her silhouette more than the other

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[136] Ethridge and Arterburn, 90.

[137] Ethridge and Arterburn, 91.

[138] Cross, 31.

[139] Gresh, 87.

[140] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin*, 22.

white girls in her youth group."[141] Her interviewer, theologian Katie Cross, does not provide much racial analysis beyond including Sofia's statement. More than just the added burden of covering her body that did not fit the standard of thin, white beauty, Sofia may have felt she would never live up to the "good Christian" standard just by nature of her culture, skin tone, and body type.[142] Latina women often bear the cultural expectation of *marianismo,* that they ought to conform to the, "submissive, docile, passive, sacrificial, patient and pure" image of the Virgin Mary. This construction of *marianonismo* demands that Latina women either acquiesce to these expectations or maintain the appearance of doing so, otherwise they risk being seen as "the traitorous, evil, and sinful temptress."[143] This is an extra burden Sofia's white peers may not have felt.

Many young people who grew up in purity culture describe their experiences as traumatic, a form of religious trauma syndrome,[144] or "body theodicy," as Cross calls it, even if they were not sexually assaulted.[145] Cross and psychologist Tina Shermer Sellers have documented how young women, especially, who grew up in purity culture exhibit

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[141] Katie Cross, "'I Have the Power in My Body to Make People Sin': The Trauma of Purity Culture and the Concept of 'Body Theodicy,'" in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture & Church in Critical Perspective,* eds. Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (London, UK: SCM Press, 2020), 30.

[142] Cross, 31.

[143] Natalie Ames and Leslie F. Ware, "Latino Protestants: Religion, Culture, and Violence Against Women," in *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women,* ed. Andy J. Johnson (New York: Springer, 2015), 152-153.

[144] According to Marlene Winell, "Religious Trauma Syndrome is the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination" (Marlene Winell, "Religious Trauma Syndrome," *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, 39 no. 2 [May 2011]: 17).

[145] Cross defines body theodicy as post-traumatic stress disorder unique to purity culture, when "a piece of theology . . . becomes trapped in the body" (27).

physiological symptoms similar to those of rape victims.[146] Jane remembers being in youth group and writing down her "'biggest sin' on a small piece of paper" which were then nailed to a "large, wooden cross." Jane had written down "struggling with sexual sin" on her little piece of paper. "I just believed I was *thinking* about sex too much," she reflects. Throughout adolescence, Jane felt "massively guilty" for kissing her boyfriend.[147] Both Jane and her husband arrived at marriage with very little to no sexual experience and were excited for the kind of sex life they were promised growing up. Their expectations were not met:

> There were so many nerves. And for me, the nerves went to guilt, because even though we were married. . . . I started just feeling terrible. I was really scared of my husband's body; I was afraid to touch him. I felt sick, just awful, dirty, like what I was trying to do was wrong. We couldn't get through it, we had to stop.[148]

After many painful attempts at having sex with her husband, Jane was eventually diagnosed with vaginismus, "a condition in which involuntary muscle spasm prevents vaginal penetration."[149] Cross describes the trauma Jane experienced as being more than just about this norm of purity culture, that she was responsible for men's behaviors, but Norm #3 as well. "I realized that I wasn't straight, I was attracted to girls too, and I had been in the past," Jane says. "This is yet another aspect of Jane's body trauma," writes Cross, "the way in which she felt forced to have her body partake in sexual experiences

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[146] Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[147] Cross, 28.

[148] Cross, 28.

[149] Cross, 29.

that felt unnatural to her."[150] Jane realized that she was bisexual, something she had been repressing until adulthood.

Contemporary evangelical purity culture discourages young women from exploring their desires and naming what pleasures or experiences they really want. Rather, purity culture encourages self-surveillance, to the point of hyper-vigilance, as with Jane. DiMarco tells young women to imagine "a cameraman with you, shooting all your moves. Then at the end of the night your entire family is getting together to look at your slide show."[151] DiMarco elsewhere writes that "Having read this book, you know what God wants from you."[152] Young people are told that they know what is right ("not even a hint…"), but that they are ultimately powerless to remain pure "without Jesus."[153] This, again, sets young women up to be expected to bear the burden of harms done to her, and it does not encourage her toward truly understanding her desires apart from the desires of her boyfriend or a patriarchal God. In purity culture, "adolescent girls' sexuality [is] almost exclusively [characterized] in terms of vulnerability."[154]

Trauma, whether sexual assault or rape, complicates our understanding of agency. We know from decades of research that traumatized bodies exhibit similar physiological behaviors—fight, flight, freeze, or fawn—that certainly do not feel like choices to the

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[150] Cross, 30.

[151] DiMarco, *Technical Virgin,* 20.

[152] DiMarco, *Sexy Girls,* 63.

[153] Gresh, 63.

[154] Gish, 7.

victim-survivor.[155] In a *HuffPost* article, Hannah writes about her anxiety disorder that was birthed out of her upbringing in purity culture:

> Dating and sex had felt so dangerous and sinful for so long—not to mention the biblical implications of dating a *woman.* I had trained myself to shut down all bodily desires and now that my desire had awakened, a fight or flight response had been activated. I couldn't seem to convince my body that dating was safe. I realized that while I'd been convinced during my youth that *I* was making the choice to not date or have sex, I had actually been stripped of bodily agency. The fundamentalism of my upbringing had terrified me into submission.[156]

Is it really fair to argue that Hannah had agency over her body's choices? We must listen to young people's stories of harm and take them at their word. And, still, our expansive understanding of adolescent agency, described in chapter 3, provides a helpful interpretive tool. What if Hannah's fight or flight responses were considered agential, a way that her body *chose* to respond to the situation? This is not the same as calling Hannah *responsible* for choices in the sense that she is morally culpable for the harm done to her. As feminist pastoral care clinician Pamela Cooper-White writes, "Whatever a woman chooses within such violently constrained choices—even if her choices may not look like the 'empowered' woman who fights back—must be understood as resistance, and a strategy of survival."[157] That includes fight, flight, freeze, and fawn.

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[155] Psychologist Pete Walker is credited with his addition of the fourth "F," fawn. For those whom this is their physiological response, they "seek safety by merging with the wishes, needs and demands of others. They act as if they believe that the price of admission to any relationship is the forfeiture of all their needs, rights, preferences and boundaries" (Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* [Lafayette, CA: Azure Coyote Publishing, 2013], 122-123. eBook).

[156] Hannah Brashers, "How an Evangelical Dating Guide and Purity Culture Gave Me an Anxiety Disorder," *HuffPost,* February 19, 2019, accessed October 23, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-kissed-dating-goodbye-trauma_n_5c66fedbe4b05c889d1f158e.

[157] Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 21.

Sofia, Jane, and Hannah bore unfair responsibility for the behaviors (Sofia) and pleasures (Jane) of men and expressed their agency in very limited ways (Hannah) because of purity culture. Their stories are a testament to the ways in which the norms of purity culture expand far beyond the scope of adolescence and have lasting impact on the adult survivor's life. These traumas are perhaps the reason so many memoirs and personal narratives of purity culture exist: as a way of making meaning of the long-term effects of these normative teachings. These three young women found creative, and at times physiologically automatic, means of resisting or participating in the norms set before them.

CONCLUSION

Rebekah Mathews concludes her story of leaving evangelicalism, and Christianity as a whole, with a love note to her younger self:

> I remember with affection the teenager I was, who secretly recorded Christian radio broadcasts because she wanted to do the right thing, who also knew she wanted more for her life than what was in front of her. I'm proud that I wrestled with my faith; if it had come easily to me, I think I would have been a different kind of person altogether, less able to take life's more confusing aspects in stride.[158]

Rebekah, like other young people in this chapter, experienced purity culture in harmful ways, finding herself not quite conforming to the norms set before her, though trying. She felt weird about cussing and avoided TV shows and movies with too much sex, per her mother and pastor's instructions. She felt sick with shame over her queerness. "I wondered if maybe God could forgive a sin like being gay," her younger self wondered.

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[158] Rebekah Matthews, "A Softer Answer," in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*, eds. Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal (Indianapolis, IN: Epiphany Publishing, 2019), 67.

"Or maybe being gay wasn't even a sin. But there was another, darker part of me, too, that thought maybe it was a sin, maybe God wouldn't forgive me, and maybe I didn't care." Rebekah imagines that had she followed the norms of purity culture she "would have felt less alone."[159] And yet, here she is as a 30-something, "proud that [she] wrestled with [her] faith," proud of the person she had become because of the choices she made.[160]

As this chapter attests, there were multiple, complicated, overlapping, and conflicting ways that young people, both queer youth and straight girls, navigated the norms of purity culture. Rebekah's story is not Addie's, Brandon's, Jane's, or Jo's. Young people's stories resist any cohesive narrative that states that all kids who grew up in purity culture feel a certain way or behave a certain way; these stories taken together and apart from their adult selves' interpretation do not provide a teleological structure from lost to found, closeted to out, believer to unbeliever. Young people make choices; those choices sometimes align with the norms of purity culture—though often failed attempts as with Linda's virgin pregnancy scare—and sometimes they don't. They sometimes make choices that make sense to adults, and sometimes they don't. All these are examples of queer adolescence—not just in homosexual and bisexual desire but through the non-normativity of adolescence described by Owen and others. In the next and final chapter of this project, I will further unpack how young people's moral agency is central to a liberative adolescent sexual ethic while critiquing the present-day discourse on purity culture that tries to limit or subjugate their agency.

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[159] Matthews, 65.

[160] Matthews, 67.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARD A POST-PURITY CULTURE SEXUAL ETHIC

Sutton and Nathanial sit on a big blue couch, staring at the camera with their big blue eyes.

> NATHANIAL: If you are really serious about honoring God, not only with your life, but with your relationship and your future marriage, then you've got to get your dating boundaries in order.
>
> SUTTON: We're here to help you.
>
> NATHANIAL: So how far is too far when it comes to physical boundaries in Christian dating? Really, I think that's the wrong question to ask. I think the question that we should be asking, is how close can I get to Jesus in my relationship? How can I best honor God with our relationship? Not, how close can we get to the line of sin without actually sinning? That's the wrong question.
>
> SUTTON: So, in the Bible, God tells us to flee from sexual temptation. There's other times where it talks about sin and how to stay away from it. But sexual immorality, it says to flee from that. And what's cool about that is that it also says that every time you're in one of those situations, God gives you a way out. So that's pretty cool.
>
> NATHANIAL: Yeah, that is good. That's good information.[1]

The married Georgia couple has been posting "Christian advice videos and family vlogs" since October 2018 and has more than 181,000 YouTube subscribers to their channel, simply named "Nate and Sutton." The advice that this couple offers in this video and others is no different from the sexual norms central to the evangelical purity culture of the 1990s and 2000s. No sex before heterosexual marriage. Identifying as a queer Christian is oxymoronic, though "struggling with same-sex attraction" is like struggling with any other sin. Watching pornography ruins relationships.

[1] Nate and Sutton, "Let's Talk About Christian Dating Boundaries," YouTube Video, 16:04, September 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q7Xz1Vk9LA.

"Purity culture lives on, and a new generation of influencers on social media as well as recent books are pushing it mainstream," writes podcaster and purity culture critic Devi Abraham, "I'm calling it Purity Culture 2.0, and there's reason to be concerned about its resurgence."[2] While I and others have marked the 2010s as the decline of contemporary evangelical purity culture,[3] another iteration of purity culture has emerged especially among Generation Z, those born after 1996. While many Millennials are still processing the impact of purity culture from two to three decades ago, young evangelicals are receiving the same messages that their older siblings and parents received, only packaged a little differently.

Along with "Purity Culture 2.0" comes critique of purity culture through new media. Podcasts like *Exvangelical, Straight White American Jesus, Good Christian Fun, Mega*, and Abraham's *Where Do We Go from Here* provide a variety of cultural critique, comedy, parody, and visions toward a life post-purity culture and post-evangelicalism. On TikTok, exvangelical Alyssa Sabo reads from her high school prayer journals, reenacts a "Christian interpretive dance at a prison in costa rica [*sic*] trying to save souls,"

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[2] Devi Abraham, "It's back: Purity Culture 2.0, Gen Z style," *Religious News Service*, December 2, 2021, accessed January 21, 2022, https://religionnews.com/2021/12/02/its-back-purity-culture-2-0-gen-z-style/.

[3] Linda Kay Klein notes the decline, without giving a specific year, in the introduction to her book, *Pure* (Linda Kay Klein, *Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* [New York: Touchstone, 2019], 25-26). Renée Roden names the turning point at 2007 when a government-mandated study showed that abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education did not curb sexual behavior in youth people at all (Renée Roden, "Britney Spears: An Icon for Purity Culture's Wounded Woman," National Catholic Reporter, August 31, 2021, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.ncronline.org/news/britney-spears-icon-purity-cultures-wounded-women). Klein and others have also named a turning point for the contemporary purity movement as 2017 when Joshua Harris apologized for the impact of his bestselling purity culture book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and the birth of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements (Klein, 268; Becca Andrews, "Sins of Submission," *Mother Jones*, August 10, 2018, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.scribd.com/article/455614914/Sins-Of-Submission).

and parodies "Pastor Micah's smokin' hot wife" raising money for a mission trip.[4] Instagram account Do Better Young Life (@dobetter_younglife) curates stories from the former Christian outreach group who have been harmed by its policies on LGBTQ leadership, sexual harassment, and racist tokenism.[5] Twitter has long been a site for critiquing purity culture from accounts like Stuff Christian Culture Likes (@StuffCCLikes) and Christian Nightmares (@ChristnNitemare) and from exvangelical leaders like D.L. Mayfield (@d_l_mayfield) and David Hayward (@nakedpastor).

So far in this dissertation, I have argued for understanding the evangelical purity culture the above critics are responding to as merely one purity culture among other historical purity cultures or movements in the United States and across the Anglophone West (i.e. anti-masturbation, social Darwinism, social purity, etc.). These movements, best understood as moral/sex panics, positioned white children and adolescents as in need of patriarchal and state protection—most often protection from the racialized other. This argument relies on an understanding of white childhood and white adolescence as bourgeois constructs—they are not neutral categories nor reflective of the phenomenological experiences of children and adolescents so much as they function as

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[4] Alyssa Sabo (@alyssasabo), "The inmates were like [expressionless face emoji] #exvangelical #fyp #missiontrip #god #lol," TikTok, January 15, 2022, https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdhCt5Pc. Alyssa Sabo (@alyssasabo), "Will you send her to Greece? #help #mission #exvangelical #pastortiktok #fyp," TikTok, August 4, 2021, https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdhCExL7.

For more on the "smokin' hot wife" trope, see Lauren D. Sawyer, "Lust is Not the Problem (White Male Supremacy Is): A Feminist Critique of the 'Smokin' Hot Wife,'" paper presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, California, November 24, 2019.

[5] See Carol Kuruvilla, "Youth Ministry Accused of Deceiving Queer Teens with 'Bait and Switch,'" *HuffPost*, August 13, 2020, accessed January 20, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/young-life-queer-teens-evangelical_n_5f1f01fec5b638cfec483951. Rachel Premack, "Young Life Projects an Image of Cool Christianity. But Former Members Say They Experienced Sexual Misconduct During Their Time at the Mega-Ministry," *Business Insider*, October 5, 2021, accessed February 4, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/young-life-sexual-misconduct-allegations-2021-10.

vessels for adult anxiety. Thus, children and adolescents, especially girls and "deviant" youth, have been used to incite protectionist moral agendas (akin to anti-abortion rhetoric today); this is less to do with the children themselves but the feelings they evoke in adults.

In chapter 3, I argued against the prevailing Western psychological and philosophical developmental theories which do not account for children's full subjectivity, especially as sexual and moral agents. Queer, childist, and feminist scholars invite us to a more expansive understanding of youth as not un- or underdeveloped adults but full persons in themselves, challenging (though not often intentionally) the narrow constructs of white, male, middle-class personhood. That is, all children and adolescents are—in relation to adult normativity—queer. This perspective affords agency to adolescents within purity culture; it recognizes teens are vulnerable within purity culture, but they also have agency to make choices about how they participate in it. Chapter 4 built on the theory presented in the previous two chapters by looking at examples of narratives written by young people about their experience in purity culture. This chapter gave epistemological privilege to the voices and experiences of young people and showed how they sometimes make choices that align with the norms of purity culture and other times make choices that (intentionally or not) disavow those norms.

In this chapter, I locate my project within the broader discourse on (anti-)purity culture. I argue that much of the discourse fails to address the structural issues of white supremacy and fails to afford white adolescents agency as participants in the system of purity culture. While critics both in and outside of evangelicalism have raised important critiques against purity culture's inherent sexism, heterosexism, and its contribution to

rape culture, much less has been written on the ways in which white youth are both harmed by and beneficiaries of purity culture as a mechanism of white supremacy. To attend to this gap, I center the work of women of color who have long named evangelical ideals of "biblical" sex as white supremacist. But because I am focused on white youth, I also turn to critical whiteness studies to name how whiteness functions and propagates among children and adolescents. Here I return to the concept of burdened virtues, introduced in chapter 3. Though I do not offer my own "post-evangelical sexual ethic,"[6] I end the chapter by naming how my project fits within the field of Christian social ethics, pointing to projects that are consistent with my own.

ANTI-PURITY CULTURE DISCOURSE AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Current critique of purity culture addresses many aspects of the harm it has enacted on young people, especially women and queer youth, yet very few have robustly challenged purity culture's embedded white supremacy. Without addressing white supremacy, these critiques only begin the important process of dismantling its theoethical, cultural, and psychological impact. Anti-purity culture discourse provides a spectrum of perspectives from both within evangelicalism and staunchly outside of it. Depending on their promixity to evangelicalism, these thought leaders counter purity culture's messages on sexism and rape culture (evangelical), heterosexism and homophobia (post-evangelical or non-evangelical), and the centrality of marriage or monogamous relationships (exvangelical). These critiques are important and certainly

[6] From David P. Gushee's book in which he offers such an ethic. David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 163.

advance the conversation, but they lack the queer, childist, intersectional feminist critique necessary to address the scope of the problem as I have named it in this dissertation.

Evangelicals

Evangelicals like Rachel Joy Welcher and Sheila Wray Gregoire rightly name the sexism within purity culture, leading to a gender double standard and perpetuating rape culture. Gregoire, a speaker and blogger, uses the results of her survey of 20,000 Christian women to argue for the importance of centering women's pleasure within heterosexual marriage. She attempts to flip the script on the importance of "saving oneself for marriage," a key norm of purity culture, but is ultimately selling the same message, repackaged. "Saving sex for marriage is not about making it more orgasmic," she writes, "but about making it more meaningful—a deep knowing—while protecting ourselves from heartache, diseases, and single parenthood. The key to sexual pleasure is not a wedding ring."[7] Though egalitarian in practice, Gregoire does not attempt to upend purity culture in any meaningful way. She still insists on heterosexual marriage being the only safe container for sex, a message that has been passed through Christian Western thought since St. Paul. Her contribution is that the good of marriage should include not just men's pleasure but women's as well.

Rachel Joy Welcher "talks back to purity culture" while reinforcing a common myth that there is one God-ordained sexual ethic.[8] Welcher very astutely names the

[7] Sheila Wrap Gregoire, *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 55.

[8] Rachel Joy Welcher, *Talking Back to Purity Culture*: *Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020), 11. eBook.

sexism embedded within purity culture, including the sexualization of women of color[9] and the gender double standard.[10] She recognizes the harm purity culture caused for single women who never found their prince charming, for those who have been sexually abused, and for "same-sex attracted" (SSA) teens who heard sermon after sermon about finding a romantic partner. Still, despite recognizing these harms, Welcher insists that "SSA" Christians remain celibate[11] and calls masturbation "the fast food of sex,"[12] thus narrowing the acceptable expressions of sexuality to heterosexual intercourse within marriage. Indeed, her vision of a post-purity culture sexual ethic rings quite similar to the culture she is "talking back to":

> Sex that honors God is practiced and celebrated within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. . . . It is their commitment to monogamy in marriage, to forsaking all others, that speaks to an even greater covenant. And the possibility of procreation, that a husband and wife's sexual union can create new life, is unique to heterosexual sex and provides us with modern-day miracle after modern-day miracle.[13]

Welcher, and other evangelicals like Jackie Hill Perry,[14] have a friendlier perspective toward queer Christians than those of a generation before ("love the sinner, hate the

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[9] Welcher, 41.

[10] Welcher, 42.

[11] Welcher, 44.

[12] Welcher, 142.

[13] Welcher, 125.

[14] See Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl Good God: The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018).

sin")[15] or a generation before that (homosexuals are "human garbage").[16] But the underlying message is the same: to act upon one's queer desire is a sin.

Post-Evangelicals and Non-Evangelicals

David P. Gushee, Ruth Everhart, and Nadia Bolz-Weber stand outside evangelicalism, furthering the critique of purity culture from their post-evangelical (Gushee) or non-evangelical (Everhart, Bolz-Weber) positions. All three thinkers offer a realistic view of U.S. culture and the place for Christian sexual ethics within that context. From a Presbyterian (PCUSA) perspective, Everhart offers a critique of purity culture in her book on the #MeToo Movement and "the church's complicity in sexual abuse and misconduct." [17] She argues that purity culture "feeds" rape culture—or the normalization of rape. Purity culture treats women as non-agents yet are responsible for men's sexuality. Everhart wisely names the importance of recognizing women's agency beyond their victimhood: "Purity culture creates a trap," she writes. "A woman's 'most-prized possession' is something that can be ripped from her by force. This implicitly casts women as frail creatures, potential victims, rather than powerful moral agents in their own lives."[18] To recognize (white) women as moral agents would mean to recognize their

[15] Gushee writes, "Sometime in the 1990s, the cultural tide began shifting [regarding LGBTQ folks within the church]. Moving just a bit with the times, some evangelicals adopted a kinder, gentler rhetoric of 'love the sinner, hate the sin'" (160).

[16] Anti-gay activist, and former Miss Oklahoma, Anita Bryant quoted in Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in Ame*rica (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 306.

[17] Everhart, 126.

[18] Everhart, 126.

desire for sex, which would disrupt the gender norms inherent in purity culture.[19] In purity culture, (white) women are victims or potential victims—they're rapeable. Everhart's discussion of purity culture and rape culture reflects the experiences of the real cis straight women and queer folks, like Hannah in chapter 4, who writes about how the "fundamentalism of [her] upbringing had terrified [her] into submission" and not recognizing her sexual agency.[20] However, Everhart does not address the doubly oppressive experience of women of color, more than the naming of statistics.[21]

Gushee and Bolz-Weber are both explicitly, and unapologetically, inclusive of queer folks in their responses to purity culture. Christian ethicist Gushee has long been a scholar of evangelicalism and has been especially critical of evangelicalism's teachings on LGBTQ desire. In his book *After Evangelicalism,* Gushee provides a thorough and carefully defined critique of many aspects of white American evangelicalism without collapsing all evangelicals (Black, Latino, progressive, global, etc.) under the same banner. Gushee names the racial and, especially, gendered power dynamics within purity culture, similar to Everhart's rape culture critique above. Regarding the purity culture practice of fathers giving purity rings to their daughters and accompanying them to purity balls, Gushee cheekily writes:

> I am all for fathers being very close to their daughters. But this approach was oddly incestuous, an Electra-complex theology that reinforced patriarchy,

[19] I include "white" here because Everhart does not mention race directly yet seems to imply she's referring only or primarily to white women.

[20] Hannah Brashers, "How an Evangelical Dating Guide and Purity Culture Gave Me an Anxiety Disorder," *HuffPost*, February 19, 2019, accessed October 23, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-kissed-dating-goodbye-trauma_n_5c66fedbe4b05c889d1f158e.

[21] Everhart, 7.

> undercut the development of young people's moral agency, and yuckily superimposed Daddy into every tentative sexual exploration.[22]

He further critiques purity culture as being "governed by men. Men decided that sexual purity was the best for the norm, and men decided that this overall approach as the best way to protect sexual purity."[23] What Gushee uniquely brings to this conversation is his conclusion that key to the problem of purity culture is evangelicals' "*inability to deal with reality* [that] a small but persistent percentage of the human population" is not attracted to the opposite sex.[24] He frames white conservative evangelicals as stubbornly unwilling to see reality for what it is, even as it goes against 2,000 years of male-driven teaching about sexuality.[25]

One would expect that a critique like this would lead to a post-evangelical sexual ethic that "deals with reality" well. But Gushee, disappointingly, reinforces the importance of "covenantal marriage"[26] among Christians without a critical eye toward how marriage has long been a tool for white male supremacy in the United States.[27] Gushee side-steps this critique only slightly by emphasizing long-term monogamy over legal marriage (especially for those whom same-sex marriage is not possible due to their

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[22] Gushee, 155.

[23] Gushee, 155.

[24] Gushee, 162, emphasis in original.

[25] Gushee, 162.

[26] Gushee, 163.

Gushee includes alongside covenantal marriage a "baseline of mutual enthusiastic consent and non-coercive, nonexploitative sex" (Gushee, 163).

[27] Gushee's overall project attends to racism and white supremacy as a part of the evangelical project. However, lacking an intersectional lens, Gushee does not tie sexuality and white supremacy together in his purity culture chapter.

countries of residence).[28] Gushee admits his perspective is from his "weary wisdom of his advanced years," as he rejects polyamory for the effect it could have on the "children."[29] While arguing for the moral good of monogamy is not in and of itself problematic—and is a part of many feminist sexual ethics as well—Gushee fails to scrutinize the ways that an emphasis on "Christian marriage" and concern for the Child have been used to victim-blame women and to deny children's moral and sexual agency. This has been true not just in contemporary evangelical purity culture but other purity cultures and movements in U.S. history, like the white slavery panic in the early 1900s.

Gushee offers an otherwise robust critique of purity culture, while looking toward "the wisdom of Scripture, history, and tradition,"[30] while Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber bucks history and tradition and re-interprets scripture to imagine "a new Christian sexual ethic."[31] Bolz-Weber, like Gushee, believes consent and mutuality to be the baseline for a good Christian ethic, but unlike him wants to "burn [purity culture] the fuck down and start over."[32] She does not prescribe specific norms like monogamy or long-term relationships but suggests a vision for sexual flourishing, which includes gratitude and generosity, forgiveness, connection, and holiness, among others.[33] Gushee

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[28] This is the same argument as the post-evangelical queer ministry, The Reformation Project, which recently put out a statement saying that "we are specifically asking churches to bless monogamous, covenantal same-sex relationships" (The Reformation Project, Facebook Post, December 27, 2021, 8:42 AM, https://www.facebook.com/ReformationProject).

[29] Gushee, 169.

[30] Gushee, 170.

[31] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 13.

[32] Bolz-Weber, 17.

[33] Bolz-Weber, 149-152.

calls Bolz-Weber's approach "an overreaction," for not providing more ethical boundaries beyond "flourishing and do-no-harm ethics."[34]

Perhaps because of her location in a mainline Protestant denomination, Bolz-Weber places less blame on contemporary evangelicals for perpetrating a harmful sexual ethic, but rather launches her strongest critique against the early church fathers and those who followed in their tradition. She writes of Augustine of Hippo: "[W]e must stop confusing his baggage and our baggage and our pastors' baggage and our parents' baggage with God's will. Because while many of Augustine's teachings have been revered for generations, when it came to his ideas around sex and gender, he basically took a dump and the church encased it in amber."[35] Not only is this an uncritical reading of Augustine within his historical context and within the feminist scholarly tradition, but also, in her brashness, Bolz-Weber still fails to name the power structures behind the permanency of Augustine's and other male-centric sexual ethics. Bolz-Weber will carelessly reject tradition but is less eager to state that a desire for purity, and a desire to teach our children to be pure, is anything but "noble" or well-intentioned.[36]

These post- or non-evangelical responses are much more inclusive than the critiques waged by those still within evangelicalism. However, they still fail to fully name the role that whiteness and white supremacist thinking has played in purity culture. For Gushee, that means addressing the ways that marriage—especially defined as "biblical"—has been hijacked by evangelicals to reinforce Victorian ideas of the white

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[34] Bolz-Weber, 168.

[35] Bolz-Weber, 40.

[36] Bolz-Weber, 21, 100.

bourgeois family. For Bolz-Weber it means uncritically throwing out everything potentially harmful without interrogating the structures of power behind it.

Exvangelicals

Finally, exvangelicals, or post-evangelicals who find themselves in opposition to evangelicalism by "affirm[ing] what evangelicalism condemns," recognize the role that white supremacy has played in purity culture and white evangelicalism in general. They "embrace the LGBTQ community fully, are thoroughly feminist, denounce the role of white supremacy in society in general, and white evangelicalism in particular . . . and seek to be aware of the intersectionality of our work."[37] There is no binding creed that distinguishes exvangelicals from other post-evangelicals; some choose to use the label and others seems to distance themselves from it.[38] One reason may be because, in practice, exvangelical discourse tends to center white experiences[39] and exvangelicals tend to prefer aggressive callouts as a primary strategy for engagement.[40] Because of their

[37] Blake Chastain, "Exvangelical'—A Working Definition," Exvangelical Podcast, March 2, 2019, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/blog/exvangelical-a-working-definition.

[38] See the responses to a tweet by Greg Jarrell (@gregontuck) who asked, "Are there folks out there who are former evangelicals but don't identify with the term 'exvangelical'?" (Greg Jarrell [@gregontuck], Twitter Post, February 20, 2022, 5:38 PM, https://twitter.com/gregontuck/status/1495573678431604740). Many responses referred to one's desire to not associate with the negative of anything. A few people of color noted that exvangelicalism "centers White Evangelicalism" (Jordan A. Jones [@advoc8_love], Twitter Post, February 20, 2022, 11:18 PM, https://twitter.com/advoc8_love/status/1495659176726765571).

[39] While certainly not all exvangelicals are white, and many do in practice deconstruct white supremacist structures, the overall movement (if it can be called one) remains primarily led by white folks like Chrissy Stroop, Emily Joy Allison, and Blake Chastain. See Bradley Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical," *Religion and Politics*, April 9, 2019, https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical.

[40] For example, when evangelical Jo Luehmann tweeted the controversial "Purity culture encourages pedophilia" they disregard reasonable critiques and doubles down on their statement. See, for instance, their exchange with @EmilyKath319, Twitter Post, February 16, 2021, 9:17 AM, accessed January 21, 2022, https://twitter.com/EmilyKath319/status/1361726514295943171.

loud and (often necessarily) harsh tone, exvangelicals are also the ones who have become a target for disgruntled evangelicals.[41] Still, exvangelicals' contributions to the discourse on purity culture are invaluable, especially in addressing the necessity for queer inclusion and liberation and exposing a culture of sexual violence and misconduct within Christian institutions.

Emily Joy Allison, a poet and a prominent voice in exvangelicalism, followed up her coining of #ChurchToo with a book that addresses how purity culture is the equivalent of rape culture in secular contexts.[42] Her project is mostly a critique of contemporary evangelical purity culture's sexual norms and mores, but unlike others above, she focuses on purity culture as a system of supremacy tied up with the racial and political projects of neo-fundamentalist evangelicals of the 1970s. Allison features a few women of color in her critique, through interviews (her primary means of citation), though her critique is not specifically antiracist in approach. Allison wisely does not attempt to prescribe an anti-purity culture ethic but offers guidance in terms of defining one's own values, prioritizing mindfulness and body work, attending therapy and receiving medicinal treatment, as accessible and as needed.

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[41] See Hannah Anderson, "I Can't Quit My Evangelical Heritage. Neither Can You," *Christianity Today*, November 19, 2021, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november-web-only/exvangelicals-evangelicalism-doubt-faith-heritage-cant-quit.html. Russell Moore, "My Dad Taught Me How to Love the Exvangelical," *Christianity Today*, October 21, 2021, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/october-web-only/russell-moore-dad-taught-love-exvangelical-pastor-church.html. Chrissy Stroop, "Evangelicals in Moral Panic Over Exvangelicals," *Religious Dispatches*, May 27, 2021, accessed January 21, 2022, https://religiondispatches.org/evangelicals-in-moral-panic-over-exvangelicals.

[42] Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 30.

In her final chapter, Allison's call for folks to "reject, dismantle, and replace purity culture" is a commensurate with the stakes she names. (For example, she calls homophobia "sexual violence," not merely a byproduct of conservative sexual ethics.)[43] She argues that there "is no way to hold on to any part of purity culture without simultaneously being a part of the problem."[44] This is a strong stance that is parallel to the language of divesting from white supremacy. However, in this statement and throughout her text, there is little room in recognizing her own complicity in purity culture as someone raised and socialized as a straight white woman (though she herself is queer), as well as the complicity of her peers. This is difficult ground to tread, of course, especially as she writes about the sexual violence that she and others experienced in purity culture. To speak of complicity and agency in this context is easily translated as victim-blaming. Allison is among other exvangelicals who critique purity culture in this way—careful to name the systemic harm but not willing to name one's own complicity in the system.

Someone else who fits the category of exvangelical, yet does not publicly call himself an exvangelical, is psychotherapist and queer Christian Matthias Roberts.[45] His book *Beyond Shame* is a self-help monograph addressed to those who grew up in purity culture or similar environments to move *through* and ultimately *beyond* shame rather than being paralyzed by shame or rejecting all sexual boundaries in a kind of shamelessness.

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[43] Allison, 114.

[44] Allison, 179.

[45] Roberts often speaks publicly alongside exvangelicals like Kevin Garcia and Linda Kay Klein, and prominent exvangelicals have endorsed his book. He is cited in Allison's *#ChurchToo,* as a positive resource as well. But unlike many exvangelicals, Roberts also engages more conservative thinkers, like Christian psychotherapist Dan B. Allender, in his scholarship.

"The struggle is about how we can be intentional around sexual ethics without falling back into the same pit that purity culture put us in—a pit of rules and regulations and morality and shame," he writes.[46] Roberts puts the emphasis on connection—something that is experienced psychologically and physiologically through biochemicals like oxytocin released during sex[47]—rather than particular relational configurations. That is, a one-night stand may create an important connection that contributes to one's flourishing, just as a long-term relationship might do the same.[48] Roberts's project is queer-inclusive, as a cisgender gay man himself, and he nods towards the importance of listening to women of color's perspectives on sexuality—and yet, this is not something that is an integrated part of his work.[49] This lack of integration is a problem of exvangelicals more broadly. "Seek[ing] to be aware of the intersectionality of our work" is not the same as actually being intersectional.[50]

Woman of Color Critique

The above thinkers get us a little closer to addressing the problem I have proposed in this dissertation by addressing purity culture's sexism, especially as it has manifested in rape culture; heterosexism and a lack of queer inclusion; and the white bourgeois ideal of "traditional" or "biblical" marriage. Those who are farther from evangelicalism are

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[46] Matthias Roberts, *Beyond Shame: Creating a Healthy Sex Life on Your Own Terms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 97. eBook.

[47] Roberts has an expansive view of sexuality, including masturbation as a part of one's sexual behavior.

[48] Roberts, 155.

[49] Roberts, 74.

[50] Chastain.

more critical and are more direct in their naming the structural harms of purity culture. And yet, even as most of the above scholars have mentioned (ever briefly) the burden purity culture places on queer folks and young women of color, the stories, voices, and insights of people of color are not centered as meaningful contributions to anti-purity culture scholarship.[51]

We might surmise, generously, that this is because purity culture affects people of color differently because of their unique embodiment. Purity culture, as a white supremacist structure, was always about *white* women's purity, and so white youth are its primary target and therefore primary victims. Books like Tamura Lomax's *Jezebel Unloosed* and Monique Moultrie's *Passionate and Pious* speak to the experiences of purity teachings within Black communities, which are not necessarily equivalent to the messages of white evangelical purity culture.[52] However, it may be more accurate to say that people of color are not centered in anti-purity culture critique because of white supremacy itself. Their stories are not deemed "normal" enough, therefore cannot be thought to represent the experiences of "normal" post- or ex-evangelicals.

I believe women of color critiques offer important insights to this conversation because they always have had to stand outside the normative bounds of purity culture due

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[51] I am indebted to the wisdom of the Purity Culture Collective, especially Sara Moslener and Madison Natarajan for advocating for women of color's voices in purity culture scholarship (in conversation with the author, December 12, 2021). Natarajan is a doctoral student currently undergoing qualitative research on women of color's experiences within white evangelical purity culture. Additional research is currently under review for publication. See M. Natarajan, A. Anantharaman, K. Wilkins-Yel, and A. Sista, "Racial Stereotypes, White Idealization, and Shame: Voices of Diverse Women in Christian Purity Culture" (poster presentation, American Psychological Association Convention, virtual, August 12-14, 2020).

[52] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious, Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

to their race. This is a sentiment expressed by both Mihee Kim-Kort, a queer Korean American woman who spent her college years invested in evangelicalism, and Brittany Cooper, a Black feminist whose high school friends were deeply involved in white evangelical purity culture, though her own Black Southern Baptist Church had its own distinct teachings on purity and sexuality.

Presbyterian minister and doctoral candidate Kim-Kort offers a queer woman of color critique of purity culture in her book *Outside the Lines*. She unequivocally names purity culture as not just a force of sexism and heterosexism but white Christian supremacy:

> Purity culture subordinates women's bodies but goes even further by necessarily devaluing dark skin, in essence, to erase nonwhite bodies. Through the force of religion, the cultures and systems of purity seek to control any bodies that would threaten the concept of purity—especially black and brown bodies of those whose sexual identities are deemed unintelligible or reprehensible according to institutional powers, whether it's the nation-state or the church, schools or the courtroom.[53]

Kim-Kort locates purity culture in broader U.S. culture, and global cultures, as being about power and the normalization of whiteness. That is, purity culture is not just about the specific experiences of young white women at daddy-daughter balls but is a reflection of systems of power that divide the world into "binaries of black or white, colonizer or colonized, father or daughter, male or female, chaste or defiled."[54] She gives the example of a Nivea deodorant ad from 2017 which touted, "Keep it clean, keep it bright. Don't let anything ruin it." And, "White is purity."[55] This ad is similar to a Pears' Soap ad from

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[53] Mihee Kim-Kort, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 147-148. eBook.

[54] Kim-Kort, 149.

[55] Kim-Kort, 147.

120 years prior, which advertised "lightening the white man's burden" alongside its tallow bar.[56]

Kim-Kort offers queerness—specifically the queerness of Jesus—as resistance to the purity message. She draws on the story in John 8, where instead of condemning a woman caught in adultery, Jesus writes something indiscriminate in the sand. Jesus does the unexpected, placing love of the vulnerable over the rules of the patriarchy. "We want so desperately for there to be black-and-white answers (actually, just white answers)," Kim-Kort writes, "clear, clean, and undeniable words and laws written in ink of sacred scrolls. But sometimes faithfulness is scribbled in the dirt and then wiped away." She offers that it is not one's relationships to purity—or proximity to whiteness—that reflects our value to God and as humans.[57]

Cooper lived between two different worlds: her Black family and church and her white social circle at school. At her church, "[t]here was no purity talk beyond bringing the flesh into submission," but she had a "front row seat to the incursion of True Love Waits programs among my white classmates."[58] Like Kim-Kort, Cooper describes purity culture as part of a larger white Christian supremacist project that has regulated sexuality for white women and Black folks throughout U.S. history. She writes that such gatekeeping and surveillance "has always been about the propagation of a socially acceptable and pristine nuclear family worthy of having the American dream, a family

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[56] *The First Step Toward Lightening the White Man's Burden in through Teaching the Virtues of Cleanliness.* Illustration. 1899. Photograph. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2002715038.

[57] Kim-Kort, 155.

[58] Brittany Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 97. eBook.

that was heterosexual, middle class, and white."[59] We saw this same argument in the purity campaigns discussed in chapter 2, where young white women were expected to uphold this "American dream" for the sake of maintaining the social hierarchy. Cooper writes that it was her grandmother's demand that she "start having sex!" that led her to a new way of thinking about—and valuing—her Black body and sexuality apart from purity culture. She calls this "grown-woman theology":

> My grandmother's indecent proposal constituted a critical and intimate dissent from the wholesale American demonization of Black women's sexuality. . . . Calling her sexuality and her sexual body parts *good* in the face of these unrelenting social messages suggests that my grandmother had wrested her own sexual subjectivity from the fearsome clutches of Christianity and white supremacy.[60]

Unlike many of the critics above, Cooper names the importance for her, and for other Black women, to participate in the Christian Church rather than reject it as a force of harm.[61] She instead seeks, and asks other Black women to seek, a Christianity that does not "set us at war with our very bodies."[62]

Kim-Kort and Cooper introduce holistic critique of white supremacy that is necessary to this project and missing from many of the more heavily distributed anti-purity culture texts. They provide theoethical responses that are commiserate to their critique and reflect their particularity as queer Asian (Kim-Kort) and Black feminist (Cooper) thinkers. They do not wholesale reject or claim Christianity, sexuality, marriage, et cetera, but shape their critique around their experiences as being

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[59] Cooper, 97.

[60] Cooper, 99-100.

[61] Cooper, 99.

[62] Cooper, 104.

marginalized and oppressed for their queerness, Brownness, or Blackness. A critical understanding of the experiences of people of color within evangelical purity culture can help us understand how whiteness functions as a normalizing force. The very fact that whiteness remains unnamed, unmarked, yet totalizing within common (anti-)purity culture discourse contributes to this reality. Cooper and Kim-Kort's insights, along with the work of critical whiteness scholars, can help us understand how white youth meaningfully participate in their racial worlds, often in oppressive ways.

PRIVILEGED VULNERABILITY: WHITE YOUTH IN PURITY CULTURE

Children, by age three, can distinguish racial difference and categorize people by race—though they are not particularly good at it. By age five, or maybe even earlier,[63] children can internalize stereotype and "reason . . . in accord with wide-spread . . . stereotypes."[64] This is true of white kids as it is with kids of color. While much research has been done on how children of color have navigated their racial identities and racialized structures within the U.S., much less research has been done on how white children and adolescents understand themselves as raced and how they talk about and interpret race.[65] This is in part because of the "culture of entitlement," where white people, including youth, do not "question [their] position within the dominant, normative group and instead accepts all the privileges of race and class that naturally come her

[63] See Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2011).

[64] Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, "Children's Developing Conceptions of Race," *Handbook of Race, Racism, and the Developing Child*, eds. Stephen M. Quintana and Clark McKown (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 39.

[65] Margaret A. Hagerman, *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 22.

way."[66] In this perspective, race and culture are what other people (Blacks, Latinos, etc.) have, not white evangelical church kids.

Whiteness "derives its potency precisely from its muteness and invisibility."[67] It thrives on not naming what it is. Sociologist Lorraine Delia Kenny, drawing on the work of Marilyn Strathern, calls this a "social greenhouse," that is, "a closed system, one that feeds off itself, an insular community that doesn't see too far beyond its present conditions and boundaries."[68] A white evangelical church or a white family in a Midwest suburb insulates the white teen where she and her peers come to understand their own experiences, in their social location and embodiment, as normative. Her taste in music is normative. Her clothing choices and her quiet, feminine sensibilities are normative. Normativity is further reinforced when a member of the community deviates from the norm—like when a girl murders her father for abusing her or a girl joins a white supremacist commune.[69] When a girl like Cheryl Pierson[70] fights back against her abusive father by killing him, she not only disrupts the sexist violence wielded against her but the white supremacist norm of the patriarchal family, where man is the head of the woman who is in charge of the children. When a girl like Emily Heinrichs[71] joins a Neo-Nazi commune, she espouses a version of white supremacy that is too outspoken,

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[66] Lorraine Delia Kenny, *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middle Class, and Female* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 1.

[67] Kenny, 3.

[68] Kenny, 5.

[69] Kenny, 12, 14.

[70] See Kenny's chapter, "Justify My Love: The Heterosexuality of Teenage Girlhood," 78-99.

[71] See Kenny's chapter, "I Was a Teenage White Supremacist," 136-166.

too overt, especially for a young woman who is thought to be nice and agreeable. Compared to these extremes, the everyday racism of white youth seems acceptable to others in the social greenhouse.[72]

Race structures the lives of all children and youth—no matter their racial identity—from their experiences in school, their interactions with law enforcement, how they learn about sex and sexuality, where they live, and who they play with.[73] These are not systems children choose for themselves, of course, but they interact with them both alongside and apart from their parents. Margaret A. Hagerman argues that when we think about how children are socialized racially, we must also "[a]dequately take into account children's active participation, or agency, in social learning processes."[74] Children will not necessarily take on their parents', peers', or teachers' perspectives on race, but form their own opinions on race, participate in antiracist projects, or perpetuate racial stereotypes across a wide age-range and in spite of any parental or societal socialization.[75]

The anti-purity culture literature considered above often recapitulates the sex/moral panic language, framing teens—especially girls and queer youth—as vulnerable to such socialization (called here indoctrination) and without agency. Exvangelicals Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal write in the introduction to their book *Empty the Pews* that the election of Donald Trump by overwhelmingly white

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[72] Kenny, 137-139.

[73] Kenny, 9-10.

[74] Hagerman, 17.

[75] Hagerman, 18.

conservative evangelicals[76] "demands that voices of those of us who have experienced the religious right from the inside, often being indoctrinated and mobilized for the culture wars in ways that caused us long-term damage, be given a hearing." The alarmist language may be called for here, as the white supremacist structures of evangelicalism are "politically pernicious, reality-averse, and often abusive," as Stroop and O'Neal write, and as I have argued in this dissertation.[77] However, their language is such that exvangelicals like Stroop and O'Neal are let off the hook for their own complicity, while evangelicals "out there" are fully to blame.

Even Kim-Kort perpetuates this idea that white evangelical girls are helpless in the face of purity culture. "The only benefits [white girls] glean from their enculturation in this system are institutional approval and protection from the consequences," she writes, "as long as they don't break the rules of the system. They are passive participants with little voice or agency."[78] However, institutional approval and protection from the consequences of impurity are two very significant privileges that white girls, and white queer youth, may have some sense that they benefit from, even as they are simultaneously harmed by it. A young white woman in purity culture has privileges because of her race and proximity to white men, as daughter and future wife. Because of her conventional beauty and presumed innocence, she gets to stand front-and-center on

[76] About half of all white women voters, of any religious tradition, voted for Trump in 2016 as well. See "An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters," Pew Research Center, August 9, 2018, accessed February 4, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters.

[77] Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, "Introduction," in *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church,* eds. Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, xxi-xxvi (Indianapolis: Epiphany Publishing, 2019), xxii.

[78] Kim-Kort, 150.

the worship team. She gets her pick of the young men in her church because she represents the pure young womanhood they have been advertised. A queer white boy's testimony of "overcoming same-sex attraction" is the highlight of the church retreat. He is invited to be the pastoral intern after high school graduation. As bona fide members in the social greenhouse, these young people not only benefit from the privileges of their race and gender performance but are the ones that will keep the greenhouse thriving.

The structures of purity culture, as a form of white supremacy, invited active participation in one's own oppression as well as in the oppression of others. But at the same time, purity culture met the very real needs of the teenagers it embraced (i.e. friendship and chosen family, meaning-making, spirituality, etc.). While it is tempting to imagine this as a zero-sum game, where one is either wholly vulnerable or wholly complicit in a system of harm, the reality is that all of us, including the smallest child, has a complex and overlapping role in a death-dealing system like white supremacist purity culture.

Burdened Virtues

When it comes to purity culture, anti-purity culture critics primarily blame parents and churches for teenagers' participation not just in youth groups, purity balls, and signing abstinence pledges; they want to blame adults for the teens' own buying into the messages of white supremacy, in believing that a good Christian girl looks a certain way (fair-skinned, thin, feminine and modestly dressed), that heterosexual marriage is the ultimate goal, that queerness ought to be blotted out or covered in the pure blood of Jesus. But as we have seen, especially in chapter 4 of this dissertation, youth participate as *full moral and sexual agents* in purity culture. Treating them as puppets or parrots of adults

does not afford young people the dignity they deserve as humans, nor does it take seriously the harm they may have caused by participating in a white supremacist system. This does not mean that we ought to hold white evangelical youth morally accountable to the same degree as Jerry Falwell, Jr.[79] or legally accountable as a white supremacist storming the U.S. Capitol.[80] Here it is helpful to return to feminist philosopher Lisa Tessman's concept of burdened virtues, introduced by way of Cristina L. H. Traina in chapter 3.

Tessman's revision of Aristotelian virtue ethics recognizes "systemic and unrelenting" bad moral luck, like racism, sexism, and classism, which though called "luck" are not to be thought of as coincidental or happenstance. Because of bad moral luck, even when a person makes the most virtuous choice possible, that choice is not "really good at all."[81] Take, for example, Brandon, the queer youth introduced in chapter 4. Brandon's means of surviving in his Southern evangelical world was to split: he had his outwardly facing "straight face" and his internal queer self. This was a tactic that is not morally good—internalizing homophobia, attempting suicide, watching straight pornography to "turn" oneself straight does not contribute to Brandon's, or anyone else's, flourishing.[82] And yet, this was likely the best choice Brandon could have made given his

[79] See Gabriel Sherman, "Inside Jerry Falwell Jr.'s Unlikely Rise and Precipitous Fall at Liberty University," *Vanity Fair*, January 24, 2022, accessed January 28, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/01/inside-jerry-falwell-jr-unlikely-rise-and-precipitous-fall.

[80] See Sarah Posner, "How the Christian Right Helped Foment Insurrection," *Rolling Stone*, January 31, 2021, accessed January 28, 2022, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/capitol-christian-right-trump-1121236.

[81] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

[82] Brandon Wallace, *Straight Face* (Portland, OR: Green Bridge Press, 2014).

circumstances. To give up his straight face and live into his queer identity would not have been a viable or even thinkable solution to Brandon in his situation. Too much was at risk, and his limited narrative experience[83] could have kept him from imagining a world beyond his adolescence, beyond his parents' house, beyond his hometown. What looks like virtuous behavior for Brandon in his situation could be deemed morally bad in other people or in other contexts. And indeed, Brandon's behavior is only partially liberating, and potentially death-dealing, to himself. While eventually he was able to come out fully as queer, it was not until adulthood and not after years of oppression under purity culture.

At the same time, the concept of burden virtues is complex enough to account for how all humans are multiply situated in positions of power and vulnerability. There are ways in which the same people benefit and are harmed by the same oppressive structure. Brandon, as a white male, had certain privileges because of his gender and race unavailable to someone like Sofia, the Mexican American young woman who was raped by her boyfriend.[84] Brandon bought into the white hope of the middle-class family with "two children and a dog."[85] He did not bear some of the same lessons in modesty or in "stop[ping] men from lusting over" him, like Sofia had to because of her gender and race. While Sofia was told, "if I kept things covered, I wasn't causing guys to lust after me,"[86]

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[83] Here I'm borrowing language from John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 72.

[84] Cited in Katie Cross, "'I Have the Power in My Body to Make People Sin': The Trauma of Purity Culture and the Concept of 'Body Theodicy,'" in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture & Church in Critical Perspective,* eds. Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross, 21-39 (London, UK: SCM Press, 2020), 30-32.

[85] This descriptor—"two children and a dog"—is from Thelathia Nikki Young's work on queer family (Thelathia "Nikki" Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, & Philosophical Imagination* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016], 5).

[86] Cross, 31.

Brandon was able to stay up all night looking at pornography. The question is not whether a certain action (hiding one's identity or acquiescing to rape) is morally good in all times and contexts, but whether it is proportionally good—or good *enough*—given the reality of the world we live in. That is, as Tessman urges, what does it mean "to engage ethically under damaging conditions"?[87]

TOWARD A POST-PURITY CULTURE SEXUAL ETHIC

What I hope this dissertation has led us to realize is that we need a sexual ethic that is complex enough to recognize the full extent of the problem of purity culture and honors the moral and sexual agencies of teenagers, especially young women and queer youth. While the above post-purity culture sexual ethics, especially those presented by Bolz-Weber, Gushee, and Roberts, begin to address the specificity of purity culture in their imaginative projects, as I have shown, they do not dig deep enough into the problem of white supremacy, nor do they center adolescents as creative moral agents. Scholars of Christian social ethics, however, provide a myriad of resources that center adolescent experience while also providing queer and antiracist critique—though they are not necessarily responding directly to purity culture. Texts like Marvin Ellison's *Making Love Just* and Kate Ott's "Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics" speak to the importance of value-based sexual ethics that center adolescents' lived experiences. I turn to their work here for two reasons: one, there is already a wealth of scholarship in the field of Christian social ethics that can be adapted and drawn upon in order to thoroughly address the problems of purity culture. I resist the individualist (white evangelical)

[87] Tessman, 23.

impulse to create my own response that neglects the rich scholarship of others to sell something "hip" and "new." Second, in the spirit of queer scholarship, I resist the creation of a normative constructive ethic that is a one-size-fits all or expects a certain trajectory away from purity culture, say, or reinscribes a binary of "good" sexuality versus "bad." I unpack this in the subsequent section, "Orgasmic Failure, Redux."

In his chapter on "What Do We Have to Learn from, as Well as Teach, Young People About Sex?" Marvin Ellison demonstrates how strict, rules-based sexual ethics are often the product of adults' anxieties and come from a long history of patriarchal Christianity. He relies on studies and statistics which show that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs do not delay or prevent sex. Although, involvement in religious programs have lower rates of sex (31% versus 60%), but that is regardless of tradition.[88] Religious teens, he notes, do not fully buy into no sex until marriage, though they tend to be for sex within committed relationships. Ellison uses this data to show that teens *are* having sex, regardless of the negative-sex or silence over sex in the church but are looking for some guidance (perhaps over coffee).

Ellison urges dialogue with teens as one way to approach sexual ethics. Notably, he treats youth as full moral agents, resisting either infantilizing or demonizing them. Faith leaders ought to help teens make good and just decisions regarding their sexuality, rather than providing them with a list of restrictions, especially those that are outdated and do not reflect all we have learned about sex and sexuality in the past 40 years. At the

[88] Ellison, here, is citing the research in *Faith Matters* (Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion, and Sexuality* [Fort Wayne, IN: LifeQuest, 2003], 35 cited in Marvin M. Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012], 119).

end of the chapter, Ellison provides not a list of rules for teens to follow but "value commitments that should inform sexual decision making."[89] Toward his commitment toward "making love just," Ellison is particularly focused on power and the ways in which power has become problematically eroticized. Drawing on Marie Fortune's work, he encourages peer intimate partners as a way to avoid such dynamics.

In her article with the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Kate Ott proposes a social justice-oriented sexual ethic that recognizes adolescent's developmental stages and holds adults responsible for guiding teens in their decision-making and moral development. Ott argues that while the primary responsibility for sex education lies with the parents, religious institutions are specially placed to provide sex education that centers religious/ethical values. Therefore, if religious institutions hold that sex is a gift from God, then they ought to be consistent in their messaging. Ott argues that this justice-oriented sex education should not just teach teens how to say no, but what to say yes to that is appropriate for their developmental stages. It should also focus on relationships in which sex takes place and should help students develop their sense of moral agency. One strategy Ott suggests is the praxis model of education, which has students work through moral dilemmas and have them role play. She notes that this may worry religious educators—that students are questioning values the institution holds dear—but this model also helps students integrate and internalize values, versus blindly accepting what has been handed to them, thus helping them expand their moral agency.[90]

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[89] Ellison, "What Do We Have to Learn from, as Well as Teach, Young People About Sex?" in *Making Love Just,* 115-137.

[90] Kate Ott, "Re-Thinking Adolescent Sexual Ethics: A Social Justice Obligation to Adolescent Sexual Health," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 7, no. 2 (2007). See also Ott's chapter on adolescence in Kate Ott, *Sex + Faith: Talking with Your Child from Birth to Adolescence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox,

Ellison and Ott provide helpful framing for faith-based adolescent sexual ethics that ought to be a part of developing a post-purity culture ethic. These ethics center adolescent experiences, recognizing children and youth as moral agents, and do not try to prescribe certain (white-centric) values. All of this is important in offering a commensurate ethic that responds to the harmful norms and messaging of purity culture.

Orgasmic Failure, Redux

Rather than trying to prescribe a post-purity culture sexual ethic that is expansive enough to account for its harms and does not further replicate them, I return to orgasmic failure as descriptive groundwork for future projects. *Orgasmic failure* is a term developed by Ott in light of queer theorist Jack Halberstam's queer failure.[91] As queer failure is a means "to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods,"[92] orgasmic failure helps us recognize that adolescents (and truly, in some ways, all humans) do not behave sexually toward a certain *telos,* but led by their own curiosity, desire, and pleasure, fail to orgasm, fail to ejaculate, fail to perform in adult (white, male, heteronormative, middle-class) ways.

2013), 116-144 and Kate Ott and Lorien Carter, "ReVisioning Sexuality: Relational Joy and Embodied Flourishing," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 20, no. 1 (March 2021):1-19, 10.1163/24055093-02001002.

[91] See Kate Ott, "Orgasmic Failure: A Praxis Ethic for Adolescent Sexuality," in *Theologies of Failure*, eds. Roberto Sirvent and Duncan B. Reyburn, 107-118 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019). See also Kate Ott and Lauren D. Sawyer, "Sexual Practices and Relationships among Young People" in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality*, edited by Brian D. Earp, Clare Chambers, and Lori Watson, 258-270 (New York: Routledge, 2022).

[92] J[ack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

We can think of young Mormons' practice of "soaking" as a useful example.[93] Soaking is when a young person's penis is placed inside another's vagina but there is no thrusting or movement to create friction. Without friction, it does not "count" as having sex; thus, young Mormons can participate in soaking without feeling guilty for having premarital sex. Further, according to the lore, while two young people are soaking, a friend could jump up and down on the couple's bed to create the friction that will cause pleasure to the penis and vagina (or clitoris). This is called "jump humping." Because the action is done not by the couple in bed but a third person, the jumper, this makes the practice morally acceptable to the teens. By eschewing agency, one does not have the moral responsibility, or moral guilt, for their behaviors. This is similar to the ways in which young evangelicals would engage in oral sex or anal sex to preserve their virginity, understanding losing one's virginity as a matter of active/frictional penis-in-vagina intercourse.[94]

Though soaking may be rarely practiced and thrives in popular culture only to panic Mormon parents and get a laugh out of the sexually liberated, it represents queer orgasmic failure and an image of adolescent creativity. We can think of soaking as just what teenagers *do*. Without robust sexual education, teens may not realize what behaviors can cause pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections; they may not know where to locate the vaginal cavity in order to have penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse. Without

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[93] See Gita Jackson, "Viral 'Jump Humping' TikTok Teaches the World About Mormon Sex," *Vice*, September 27, 2021, accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/akgb88/viral-jump-humping-tiktok-teaches-the-world-about-mormon-sex.

[94] See, for example, Mark D. Regnerus, "Imitation Sex and the New Middle-Class Morality," *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163-182.

this knowledge accessible to them, they will participate in behaviors that meet their curiosity, desires, and pleasure. This act of soaking, as a form of orgasmic failure, frustrates adult sensibilities. It does not *look* like adult heterosexual behavior in that it does not include thrusting or penetration. It does not *look* like adult monogamous sexual behavior because it involves a third person (the jumper). Adolescents, by nature of who they are in relation to normative adulthood, will continue to queer sexuality. Our sexual ethics, then, need to account for this.

Like the Mormons on TikTok, young people like Alma who only masturbates with markers and tissues in her panties[95] or Danny who finds Christian scripture to house helpful metaphors for his gender transition[96] find means of expressing their sexualities and genders in a system that is not set up for them to thrive. As a white supremacist structure with rigid norms for what it means to be a white woman and white man, what context sexual pleasure ought to be confined to, and what structure a family ought to take both socially and economically, contemporary evangelical purity culture demands that its youth conform to its norms or be punished for it. But teens fail to conform, both by choice and by the mere impossibility, for some, of reaching white, male, middle-class, heterosexual adulthood. And this act of failure—not true rebellion nor a moral good in any clear, universal sense—taps on the glass of the social greenhouse. It imperfectly, messily draws attention to the ways that the system does not work, not for them as white girls or white queer youth, and certainly not for their peers of color.

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[95] Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018), 125.

[96] Daniel Mallory Ortberg [Lavery], *Something that May Shock and Discredit You* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020). eBook.

In this way, I offer orgasmic failure as a sexual ethic. We tend to think of sexual ethics as sets of prescriptive or proscriptive rules describing what one can or cannot do with their bodies, especially on an individual level. As I have already shown, orgasmic failure resists this notion of rule-giving and rule-following by describing creative forms of resistance or re-interpretations of sexuality that challenge imposed cultural norms (e.g. not having sex means not having PVI means soaking instead). Orgasmic failure is a sexual ethic in that it is an *orientation toward* a way of being and behaving; it imagines another way to be a sexual being that does not require rigid gender or sex roles, goals toward orgasm or reproduction, or defines age-appropriateness. It offers a disruption of and an alternative to normative white sexual ethics.

We can imagine how adopting a sexual ethic like orgasmic failure could lead to changes in public conversations around sex and sexuality. Orgasmic failure could alter educators' emphasis on teaching "safe sex" and sexual reproduction. Instead of only teaching proper condom usage toward the prevention of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, educators could guide youth toward understanding consent and power dynamics.[97] Beyond mere "yes" and "no," educators could help youth understand how their desires are shaped by the worlds they inhabit and how to listen to the needs and wants of their bodies and their partners' bodies. This would be grounded in a holistic understanding of sex (including behaviors beyond penile-vaginal intercourse) that has a multiplicity of purposes (pleasure, connection, stress-relief, and so on). Orgasmic failure could also lead adults toward taking youth seriously in their self-expression. While public

[97] And, perhaps, teach about other forms of contraceptives and prophylactics like intrauterine devices, diaphragms, dental dams, sponges, patches, and so forth.

discourse today suggests that children cannot possibly know themselves to be queer or trans and must be influenced by media or adults around them[98]—not unlike the view of the "sensate" child of the 19th century—attuning to orgasmic failure helps us recognize that *all* humans are sexual beings, even the youngest child. This invites us to allow children to wear the clothes they most want to wear, be called by the name they identify as, and to not push a child toward white heteronormativity in their relationships across genders. Orgasmic failure, as a queer ethic, imagines a different way of being a sexual person.

CONCLUSION

This wholly interdisciplinary, intersectional, and inductive dissertation took on evangelical purity culture as a white supremacist project. It began with a question about agency, and complicity—how can we recognize impressionable 15-year-old twins named Ariana and Ariah as wanting the life their parents set up for them? How might we understand them as choosing to wear silver purity rings, choosing to wait until marriage to have sex, or choosing (perhaps) to subversively reject it all while fooling their parents? Their story led us to a historical exploration of evangelicalism and its ties to moral/sex panics that sought to surveille and protect young white women's bodies and punish Black bodies for their supposed deviance. At the center of these moral/sex panics were children, or the idea of Children, further unpacked through the work of queer, feminist, and childist

[98] See the recent (spring 2022) discourse on the "Don't Say Gay" bill in Florida and the anti-trans bill in Texas. Amber Phillips, "Florida's law limiting LGBTQ discussion in schools, explained," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2022, accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/01/what-is-florida-dont-say-gay-bill. Elizabeth Sharrow and Isaac Sederbaum, "Texas isn't the only state denying essential medical care to trans youths. Here's what's going on," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2022, accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/10/texas-trans-kids-abortion-lgbtq-gender-ideology.

scholars who reject the subjugation of children as unformed humans and non-agential. I centered the real, lived experiences of adolescents to draw attention to how they make choices about their bodies and sexualities. Not mere puppets of adult desires, these youth chose to align with purity culture teachings or reject them. Their resistance, however, was often not wholly liberative, as they were burdened by the structures of white supremacy they lived within. White girls and white queer youth, through their adult selves' narration, could not or would not name their white privileges, thus contributing to the thriving of the insular "social greenhouse" of whiteness.

This dissertation sought to reject the easy binaries presented by both evangelicals and exvangelicals, that one is either wholly agential, complicit, and therefore invulnerable *or* wholly victimized, vulnerable, and therefore non-agential. Rather, humans—youth included—hold much more complexity in their subjectivities. In purity culture, white girls are privileged by their race but vulnerable by their age and gender—and at the same time, too, they are privileged by their youthfulness and beauty. White male-presenting queer youth are privileged by their race and gender but vulnerable by their sexuality. And yet, even this "struggle with same-sex attraction" can be channeled into a powerful testimony. What I hoped to do in this project is break open these categories and offer a new way to see youth, see sexuality, see whiteness, see purity culture with the vision toward diverse approaches to human flourishing.

ONE MORE STORY

This is a story I've told many times, about the afternoon I drove from my house—my parents' house—to the Starbucks across from Glenbrook Mall, where my best friend came out to me as queer. I have told the story of sitting in my car, Ash in the passenger's

seat, us with cold, frothy frappucinnos between our knees, and the "I'm gay—well, bi" coming out of my best friend's mouth. The "I think that's why I was jealous of Luke"—my junior-year boyfriend—"'cause I liked you." And the adamant, but shaky, response I gave: "No."

No, you're not gay. No, you didn't like-like me. No, I do not accept this reality.

Fourteen years of apologies, therapy, and reparations in the form of advocacy work have helped me assuage the shame I feel for my 18-year-old self. Plenty of well-intentioned people have invited me to forgive and forget, to remember that I was a kid then and I did not know then what I know now. Harboring self-contempt and participating in self-flagellation are, no doubt, not helpful ways forward. But I know from this dissertation that what has been missing from my introspective work, and my external justice-making, has been the recognition that even as an 18-year-old girl, steeped in purity culture, I was a moral and sexual agent. I made choices, however limited in scope, based on what was blooming in the social greenhouse I found myself in—but I made choices nonetheless.

When I tell the story about Starbucks and the frappuccinos, I forget to mention all that was leading up to that moment. For months, my best friend had been pulling away, finding friendship in a girl with a gap-tooth smile. To say I was jealous of the new girl was an understatement; I *hungered* for Ash. I liked to imagine us as Jacob and Esau, brothers reuniting after one of us had betrayed the other. (I always saw myself as Jacob, the betrayer. Would Esau ever forgive me? Would he kiss me at the crossroads?)[99]

[99] Genesis 33.

I had confided in two of my guy friends, two of Ash's ex-boyfriends no less, about what to do. In adolescent fashion, my guy friends divulged the rumors they had heard, that Ash and the gap-toothed girl were sending each other sexual text messages. I laughed it off, not even entertaining the idea, as I had known from experience that when two girls were best friends, people were bound to suspect they were lesbians.

But then a few days later, I was on my way to Starbucks. I remember being at the intersection of Coldwater and East Collins Road when it hit me. *Maybe the rumors were true*. This was quite literally a crossroads moment for me. I had a choice in that moment in how I would respond to Ash if the rumors were true (as they were). The choice I made in that moment, and again in the Starbucks parking lot, was to let my culture, my own adolescent sexual ethic, my gender, sexuality, race, and my nascent understanding of the Bible and theology have the final say about what it meant to be in relationship with Ash. I knew in that moment that I could have chosen a different way—and in fact, I did choose different ways in the weeks, months, and years that followed.

As soon as word got around about Ash and the gap-toothed girl, parents and church leaders were mobilized and began making rules about who could see whom when and who could attend church. My youth pastor's wife sat with me, again at the Starbucks across from the mall, and reminded me that what Ash was doing—or who Ash claimed to be—was sinful.

Not in any streamlined way, and certainly not with a particular future in mind, I started asking questions. I started questioning the sexual norms that I had come to take for granted—that had truly served me so well at this point in my life. Three high school boyfriends, and plenty of chaste kissing. Like Kenny writes of the social greenhouse,

"[i]nterpreting the norm denaturalizes it and undercuts the seamlessness of privilege. . . . The moment one calls attention to privilege it begins to unravel."[100] Slowly, the norms of purity culture began to unravel for me.

About a year later, after Ash had fallen back into a heterosexual relationship—the result of a church camp conversion—and then back out as queer, Ash called me in a crisis, the details of which were as blurry then as they are now. I was at my evangelical college then, and we were not allowed to stay over at anyone's house—even a best friend's—without being granted permission. I told my R.A. the gist of what I knew, then drove through snowy central Indiana to Ash's parents' house, a place I had spent so many hours of my adolescence. Ash was OK. Whatever the crisis was, it was over. I felt like the best friend once again, Ash's savior, the beloved.

It was late, maybe midnight, and we discussed sleeping arrangements. Did I want to share a bed with Ash—as I had for years—or sleep in the guest room? Another crossroads. I remembered what I had learned about sexual temptation and lust. I chose the guest room.

I tell this story in full because it illustrates how important it is to recognize a young person's—in this case my own—sexual and moral agency in order to move through it toward a sexual ethic that does not recapitulate the same problems of white supremacist purity culture. Merely decrying the harmful choices I made in my youth is not enough, but nor is forgiving and forgetting them without deeper reflection. My own

[100] Kenny, 33.

sexual subjectivity and agency grew "poorly, barely, slowly"[101] through my adolescence and is still growing in such a haphazard, awkward way as I enter my 30s. The choices I made, and make, are not always product of my purity culture upbringing. There were minor moments of questioning and disagreeing that, though small, led to bigger questions and the more momentous choice to, eventually, leave behind evangelical views on homosexuality altogether. There were other moments, too, that I slid—and slide—back into those encultured ways of thinking that lead to harm to myself and others. But failure, as we have seen, is part of the messy work of being human; and even as we "reject, dismantle, and replace purity culture," that work may never be linear nor complete.[102]

[101] From Anne Lamott, an important thinker in my turn from evangelicalism: "This is how we make important changes—poorly, barely slowly. But still, [Jesus] raises his fist in triumph" (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* [New York: Riverhead, 2004], 46).

[102] Allison, 114.

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